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# An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of Teachers' Perspectives of Differentiated Instruction in K-3 Inclusion Classrooms

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# Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Julie Franklin

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

## Review Committee

Dr. Terri Edwards, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty  
Dr. Christian Winterbottom, Committee Member, Education Faculty  
Dr. Nancy Williams, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost  
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2020

Abstract

An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of Teachers' Perspectives of Differentiated  
Instruction in K-3 Inclusion Classrooms

by

Julie Franklin

EdS, Liberty University, 2013

MA, Liberty University, 2011

BS, Emmanuel College, 2010

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2020

## Abstract

Researchers have addressed teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction or teachers' perspectives on inclusion classrooms, but there was limited research on the combined topics of teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. This interpretative phenomenological analysis used one to one interviews and reflective journals to explore nine teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms. The study's conceptual framework was comprised of Vygotsky's social constructivist theory and Piaget's theory of cognitive development. The research question and sub-questions asked about the challenges and successes teachers encountered in planning and implementing differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms, and what teachers believed would improve their use of differentiated instruction. The study's research questions were created to identify the personal experiences of teachers who differentiate instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms. Thematic data analysis using a priori, open, and axial coding were used to explore data for essential themes based on the study's framework. Three themes emerged: a) teachers' main concern was for students, b) teachers lacked confidence when implementing differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms, and c) teachers felt they did not have enough effective resources. This may lead to administrators listening to teachers' concerns; professional development activities may be created to address teachers' needs; teachers might improve the quality of instruction and raise student achievement using the successes and challenges teachers shared on teaching in inclusion classrooms; administrators may use the teachers' suggestions for improved professional development to help implement best practices of differentiated instruction.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this work to my late parents, Jerry and Annette Jordan. I will never forget how excited my parents were when I decided to go to college at the age of 35, married, and a mother. They encouraged me every step of the way, even from their view from Heaven. I also dedicate this work to my late grandmother, Willie Ruth Jordan. She always wanted to be a teacher, but never saw her dream realized. I know she is proud of me.

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I am also thankful for my children Jake, Courtney, and Josh. Thank you for always listening to me lament over all that I had to do and keep pushing me forward. God has truly blessed me with amazing children. I am also thankful for my grandson, Jay. He gave the perfect opportunity to de-stress and simply love him. In those moments, he'll never understand how much I just needed to rock and hold him.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Educators are expected by stakeholders to meet the needs of all learners in their classrooms (Makoelle, 2014; Tomlinson, 2015). When examining the needs of students educated in their least restrictive environment, education professionals must comply with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act or IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). This law mandates that students who are gifted and that students with disabilities are to be educated along with their general education peers in the same classroom if it is the students' least restricted environment (Carson, 2015; Petersen, 2016). Schools are responsible for ensuring that students with disabilities have access to grade-level standards in the least restrictive environment; gifted students in the same class are expected to receive rigorous and challenging instruction (Dixon, Yssel, McConnell, & Hardin, 2014). Educators are required to implement teaching strategies that address all learners' needs, so that every student reaches their fullest potential regardless of ability (Makoelle, 2014; Tomlinson, 2015). These requirements result in differentiated instruction that accelerates the learning of all students. By differentiating instruction, teachers address students' needs by how content is presented, how it is learned, and how students respond (Dixon et al., 2014).

Research findings indicated that teachers' attitudes, perspectives, and expectations had a direct influence on student outcomes, which was mainly important in inclusion settings (Hunter-Johnson, Newton, & Cambridge-Johnson, 2014; Ko & Boswell, 2013). Teachers needed the opportunity to voice their concerns and successes about differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms to the leadership in their building

(Rentner, Kober, Frizzell, & Ferguson, 2016). Possible social change from this study's findings are that leaders and others could use this study to produce professional development opportunities and other supports to help teachers feel more successful. This study's findings may impact positive social change by giving teachers an opportunity to share their experiences in inclusion classrooms and implementing differentiated instruction.

Chapter 1 includes the background, problem statement, and the purpose of this study as well as the conceptual framework used to design this study and the research questions. In this chapter, I define the nature of the study and define terms. I also identify the assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study.

### **Background**

Studies have shown teachers want their voices heard when describing their concerns and successes in the classroom (Kass, 2013; Rentner et al., 2016; Warren & Hale, 2016). District personnel and administrators who are willing to address teachers' needs and their desire to share their authentic knowledge related to lived classroom experiences provide teachers with a platform to voice concerns and relieve stress and anxiety (Garrick et al., 2017; Walton, Nel, Muller, & Lebeloane, 2014).

If teachers are not given the opportunity to voice their ideas and concerns about challenges in the classroom, district and local administrators may not recognize how to provide critical professional development opportunities and other supports that will enhance instructional practices (Bayar, 2014; Paju, Rätty, Pirttimaa, & Kontu, 2016). Garrick et al. (2017) noted that teaching is recognized as a high-stress occupation, and

teacher stress is linked to reduced teacher performance. Teachers' performance and student achievement may be adversely impacted when teachers' voices are not heard (Monsen, Ewing, & Kwoka, 2014; Paju et al., 2016).

Some district personnel and administrators do not recognize the needs of their teachers, and they are not providing opportunities for them to develop into highly effective educators through the construction of new knowledge created from their personal experiences; this results in a gap in research on practice (Rentner et al., 2016). Researchers discovered that teachers feel inadequately prepared to work with students with important intellectual, physical, and psychological difficulties in mainstream classrooms (Garlick et al., 2017; Paju et al., 2016; Spencer, 2016; Werts Carpenter, & Fewell., 2014). Providing high-quality professional development opportunities can produce positive changes and improved outcomes for students (Sandilos, Goble, Rimm-Kaufman, & Pianta, 2018). Teachers who do not have the resources to overcome stressors will experience an increase in off-task and problem behaviors in the classroom (Sandilos et al., 2018). Administrators need to recognize the struggles and accomplishments teachers are experiencing with the implementation of differentiated instruction in inclusion settings (Bayar, 2014; Monsen et al., 2014).

This study identified K-3 teacher's perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. Research findings showed that general education teachers do not always have positive perspectives on inclusion classrooms (Coady, Harper, & De Jong, 2016; Coubergs, Struyven, Vanthournout, & Engels, 2017). Many teachers have indicated that they do not feel prepared to teach in inclusive settings and meet the needs

of students with disabilities (Gaines & Barnes, 2017). This reflected the lack of pre-service and in-service professional development opportunities on how to meet the needs of students with disabilities in general education classrooms (Florian & Graham, 2014; Gaines & Barnes, 2017). The negative perspectives teachers have been compounded by teachers often being evaluated by students' test scores (Gaines & Barnes, 2017; Prilleltensky, Neff, & Bessell, 2016).

Researchers have indicated that differentiated instruction can produce negative perspectives for teachers especially when they do not know how to implement it correctly (Suprayogi, Valcke, & Godwin, 2017). Planning for differentiated instruction is time consuming and especially difficult for novice teachers (De Neve, Devos, & Tuytens, 2015). Collaboration with fellow teachers and professional development opportunities are proven to help teachers to implement differentiated strategies effectively and to improve their perspectives (De Neve et al., 2015; Sandilos et al., 2018).

### **Problem Statement**

In a rural school district in the southeastern United States, there is a lack of understanding of the perspectives of teachers concerning differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms. Many factors contribute to this problem. For example, this district depends on teachers' undergraduate coursework to ensure pre-service teachers enter the field with the expertise required to ensure that differentiated instruction is implemented successfully in the classroom. However, teachers have identified differentiated instruction as a professional area that needs improvement (County School System (pseudonym), 2019).



Much research reported on teachers' perspectives of inclusion classrooms, or on their perspectives of differentiated instructional strategies, but there was limited research on the combined topics. Differentiated instruction in mixed ability classrooms can benefit all students in the areas of academics, social skills, satisfaction with school, and attendance (Pilten, 2016; Tomlinson, 2015). The reviewed literature detailed the significance the inclusion setting had on student outcomes when students could learn along with their non-disabled peers (Alvi & Gillies, 2015; Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016; Pilten, 2016). There was a gap in research on practice when determining teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms. To explore teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms, I used an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which allowed me to examine their personal experiences. By addressing teachers' needs, this study may help to increase communication between administrators and teachers. This could result in additional resources and professional development opportunities that improve instruction.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this IPA was to explore teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms in a rural school district in the southeastern United States. Meeting the needs of all students of various ability levels in the same classroom requires teachers to be effective at differentiated instructional practices (Tomlinson, 2014). Understanding the successes and challenges teachers experience while teaching inclusion classrooms is necessary to improve the quality of instruction and student achievement (Makoelle, 2014; McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014).

There were over 600 students attending the target K-5 elementary school. Of this population, 14% were identified as students with disabilities (SWD) (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2018). Inclusion took place in many of the classrooms throughout the building using a co-teaching format, where one qualified general education teacher and one qualified special education teacher work together as a team to provide instruction and assessments to all students in the same classroom (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016; Tomlinson, 2014).

### **Research Question**

I used the following research question (RQ) and two sub questions (SQs) to guide my study.

RQ: What are teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms?

SQ1: What are the challenges and successes teachers encounter in planning and using differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms?

SQ2: What do teachers believe will improve their use of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms?

The study's research questions and subquestions were created to identify the personal experiences of teachers who differentiate instruction in inclusion classrooms. Interview questions were used to examine teachers' perspectives of differentiated instructional strategies when meeting the needs of diverse learners. Diversity included the students with disabilities and those of the general population. The interviews included one to one interview questions that were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Participants were given journals to write down their reflections for 7 days; they were given with guided questions (see Appendix B) to guide their reflections.

Transcriptions were annotated for reoccurring themes and ideas using hand coding. The coding program MAXQDA stored all collected data. Thematic data analysis using a priori coding, open coding, and axial coding, was used to explore the data for essential themes. Such themes were identified and recorded. Information was bracketed to ensure the dependability of all themes and to ensure that my interpretation remained unbiased. Bracketing is used in qualitative research to alleviate the possible negative effects of biases that may skew the research results. Audit trails were maintained to allow transparency; thus the steps taken from the beginning of the study to the development and reporting of findings define a research path (Anney, 2014; Amankwaa, 2016; Korstjens, & Moser, 2018). I retained records of all the steps taken throughout the study.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study was Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory and Piaget's (1936) theory of cognitive development. Vygotsky's view of special education consisted of the belief that special education programs should have the same sociocultural influence as general education programs (Saggu, 2015; Vygotsky, 2011; Vygotsky, 2012). The research questions were reinforced by this theory because it supports the inclusion classroom model. The theory was essential for this research because it reinforced the significance of all children, regardless of ability, to be educated in the same classroom setting. Vygotsky (1978) encouraged the idea that children with special needs should be included in the general education classroom

(Hunter-Johnson, Newton & Cambridge-Johnson, 2014; Spratt & Florian, 2015).

Vygotsky (1978) determined that children with special needs who participated in a differentiated learning environment could develop higher functioning skills. School officials incorporate social constructivist theory when they develop inclusion classrooms where all students, regardless of ability, are engaged in the learning process together (Florian, 2014).

Piaget's theory of cognitive development is important to differentiated instruction (Galvan & Coronado, 2014). Piaget believed that ideal learning happened when an association was made between the student's cognitive level and instruction (Besch, 2014; Carlson & Wiedl, 2013). Piaget expressed the importance of children constructing new ideas from their background knowledge, which was derived from their personal experiences (Galvan & Coronado, 2014). Piaget's (1936) theory of cognitive development explains how students build upon what they already know through various means of instruction and how they better process newly acquired information (Taylor, 2017). By implementing their background knowledge, students construct a deeper understanding of new concepts and increase their understanding. By using both Vygotsky's (1978) and Piaget's (1936) theories, I explored teachers' perspectives of inclusion classrooms and the use of differentiated instruction to socially construct new knowledge.

The conceptual framework focused on student learning which was vital for this study on teacher's perspectives. It gave a sound foundation to construct a clear understanding of how teachers' perspectives may impact student learning. It related to the

IPA approach by providing perspectives into the experiences of teachers implementing differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. This study identified challenges and successes teachers encountered when planning differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. The conceptual framework supported the importance of discovering what teachers believe would help them become more successful at implementing differentiated instruction, and what influence current professional development opportunities had on differentiated instructional practices.

I began with a priori coding to guide data analysis as I carefully read the texts. A priori codes were created through a deductive approach using the research questions based on the conceptual framework. A priori coding labels included perspectives, challenges, successes, improvements, and professional development.

Once interviews were transcribed verbatim and the participants' reflective journals collected, I transcribed the data using Microsoft Word, and uploaded it to the software MAXQDA for storage. Data analysis was grounded in the conceptual framework by identifying themes related to elements of social constructivist and cognitive development theories. I then re-read transcripts and journal entries and used open coding to conduct a deeper analysis of data. Open coding is the breaking up of data into smaller parts (Sang & Sitko, 2015). I implemented creative coding, which allowed hierarchical code structures to be created based on relationships between identified codes. I identified top level codes and sublevel codes. This enabled me to create meaningful groups of data.

Once open coding was completed, I incorporated axial coding to further investigate the data for additional themes. The axial coding was used to further identify relations between the data (Blair, 2015). I used thematic data analysis to enable essential themes to emerge. Thematic data analysis was used to intensely examine text to organize large amounts of data into a sufficient number of categories ((Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

As I identified emerging themes, the data were cross-referenced with demographic information to reveal any common trends among participants' responses. The findings led to the construction of new knowledge via open and axial coding techniques. Once all data were analyzed and coded, I began quantifying it using hand coding to create a table that would visually represent the information and allow comparisons to be made between texts. I used demographic information to reach conclusions about the research question and identify any discrepant cases. Member checks allowed participants the opportunity to review a one-page summary of the data analysis (Thomas, 2017).

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study was qualitative. Research tools included individual interviews and teacher journals. I used collected data to completely analyze teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms to socially construct new knowledge expressed in common themes. The design for my study was phenomenology. IPA helped to cultivate insight and a deeper understanding into the perspectives of a specific group of teachers about differentiated instruction in inclusion

settings. Thematic data analysis using a priori coding, open coding, and axial coding were used to explore the data for essential themes. It was fundamental to completely recognize the experiences of educators who were working in inclusion settings to determine whether there were comparable themes present throughout the individual interviews and the journal entries. I used a reflective journal to write down my own thoughts and ideas that formed throughout the research. For this study, I explored the perspectives of general education teachers and special education teachers on differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms.

One to one interviews were implemented with six general education teachers and three special education teachers. By working in inclusion classrooms, participants gave rich detail and personal experiences (Noon, 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Questions were broad and open-ended so that the participant could express his or her point of view extensively (Bevan, 2014; Noon, 2018). Participants were advised on the importance of honesty because it impacted the credibility of the results. They were reassured that their responses were completely anonymous using pseudonyms.

Participants used reflective journaling for 7 days following the interviews to record their daily reflections on phenomena with differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. This gave participants the chance to make their voices heard and to construct a personal account of the thoughts and decisions that were made during classroom instruction, and the educators' individual experiences.

## Definitions

A list of pertinent terms used in this study is noted below to aid in the understanding of the content of this dissertation. These terms should be familiar with educators, but some words or phrases may have multiple meanings that may create confusion.

*Co-teaching*: is an instructional practice when a highly qualified general education teacher and a highly qualified special education teacher work collaboratively to plan instruction for the same classroom that meets the needs of all learners (Lakkala, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2016).

*Differentiated Instruction*: is an approach to curriculum and instruction that systematically takes student differences into account in designing opportunities for each student to engage with information and ideas to develop specific skills (Dixon et al., 2014).

*Individualized Education Plans (IEP)*: it is a legal document describing the individual needs of a child who receives special education services (Sharma & Sokal, 2016; Srivastava, de Boer, & Pijl, 2017).

*Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)*: is a law that ensures students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

*Inclusion*: the provisions created for individuals with special education needs or disabilities taught in the same environment as peers without disabilities (Bisol, Valentini, & Braun, 2015).



*Least restrictive environment:* as mandated by IDEA, students with disabilities must fully be educated with their typically developed peers when possible (Shoulders & Krei, 2016).

### **Assumptions**

The participants were a representation of general and special education teachers in this small rural school district. When conducting the study, I assumed they would all be honest and forthcoming. As teachers, it was assumed they would have opinions and ideas about differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. I also assumed that they had no issues with health that could impact participation in the study and were giving clear responses. I assumed that all teachers were hired qualified and had the necessary certifications (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

### **Scope and Delimitations**

One to one interviews and journals were used for this IPA. Participants were selected by purposeful sampling based on their shared experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2009; Yin, 2018). Participants shared information about their personal experiences with differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. All worked in the same K-5 elementary school. They had various ability levels, education backgrounds, content knowledge, and understanding of differentiated instructional strategies. The scope of this study was limited to teachers at one school who taught in grades K-3 inclusion classrooms.

In this study, I examined the perspectives, concerns, and successes that participants experienced with differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. One

delimitation was only general and special education teachers with experience in inclusion classrooms participated. No data were collected from other stakeholders such as administrators, paraprofessionals, or parents.

Theories that were considered for this study that were rejected include Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory (2011), and Garrison, Anderson, & Archer's Community of Inquiry (2010). Gardner's (2011) Multiple Intelligence (MI) theory emphasized each human possesses the ability to learn effectively using his or her specific intelligence ability (De Jesus, 2012; Ekinici, 2014). Gardner identified the following intelligences: visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, linguistic, existential, logistical-mathematical, and naturalist. Not all children learn in the same way; the essence of differentiation (Ekinici, 2014; Gardner, 2011). Per the research, teachers felt MI Theory helped them to create instructional strategies that assisted them to meet the learning needs of all students regardless of ability (De Jesus, 2012; Morgan, 2014). This theory was rejected because it focused more on the learning styles of students instead of actual differentiated instructional practices.

The Community of Inquiry theory (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010; Peacock & Cowan, 2016) detailed how those involved in inclusion settings were intertwined in a learning community based on inquiry. Grounded largely on Dewey's (1938) theory of inquiry, Garrison et al. (2010) used social inquiry as a catalyst in the development of cognitive presence, which was one of three core elements of Community of Inquiry. The other elements were teacher presence and social presence. These presences were used in combination to create the Community of Inquiry thread of the theoretical framework,

which supported collaborative learning, reflective inquiry, teacher impact on student learning, and a sense of community (Garrison et al., 2010; Garrison & Akyol, 2015). This theory was rejected because it was linked to online community based learning, rather than collaborative classroom instruction.

### **Limitations**

When considering possible limitations, the outcomes of the research may be difficult to generalize from a small sample of the population (Tipton, Hallberg, Hedges, & Chan, 2017). There were nine teachers teaching inclusion classes in K-3. The study examined the perspectives of teachers from one elementary school in a single district. The sample of participants was from a small rural school district; therefore, the sample may not adequately reflect a larger population such as a large school district or urban area school district. Participants were allowed to drop out at any time with no repercussions, but there were no participants who requested to drop out.

As a former general education and special education teacher, I had personal perspectives about differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. I addressed this limitation by setting aside my own biases and focused solely on the data collected from one to one interviews and journals. I kept a reflective journal to avoid making assumptions and biases. This ensured that the voices of the participants, and not my own, were heard, thus resulting in trustworthiness. Data from research was bracketed to ensure dependability of all themes that were identified, and safeguarded that my interpretation remained unbiased. Bracketing was used to set aside any previously held theories or assumptions and to maintain a non-participatory point of view (Simon, 2011; Sorsa, M.,

Kiikkala, I., & Åstedt-Kurki, 2015). I focused on the immediate phenomenon being studied, which yielded objectivity

There was little research on the combined topics of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. This made it difficult to determine gaps in research on practice. The literature reviewed mainly focused on the independent topics of differentiated instruction and inclusion classrooms. I addressed this limitation by allowing information to be synthesized and gave inferences about the combined topics.

### **Significance**

As education professionals, it is important for teachers' voices to be included and for their ideas to be addressed and appreciated (Rentner et al., 2016; Sokal & Sharma, 2014). According to researchers, when leaders have heard their voices, an impact for positive social change could take place as communication was strengthened and professional learning communities were reinforced (DuFour & DuFour, 2012; Rentner et al., 2016). As identified through the Title IIA Needs Assessment Survey, local teachers do want further professional development for differentiated instruction (County School System (pseudonym), 2019). Through this study, teachers shared their current perspectives on differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms and voiced their concerns and successes in order to socially construct valuable knowledge that could help in improve practices.

The potential contributions of this study included a better understanding of teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. This study sought to identify positive and negative perspectives about mastering the skills needed to

effectively implement differentiated instructional strategies in inclusion settings. By understanding the successes and challenges teachers experience while teaching in inclusion classrooms, teachers could improve the quality of instruction and raise student achievement. For their part, administrators could determine areas of professional development that teachers would value and implement as best practices.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 1, I focused on the purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis: teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms. Through this research, teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms were identified. While an abundance of research has been conducted on differentiated instruction and inclusion classrooms, little research has been conducted on the two together.

The background of this study detailed the stressors teachers face, and how administrators could meet their needs. Participants were given the opportunity to share their ideas and experiences as inclusion teachers through one to one interviews and reflective journals. The resulting data were quantified by coding information through thematic data analysis. Information was bracketed to ensure dependability of all themes that were identified, and to safeguard that my interpretation remained unbiased. I also kept a reflective research journal for ideas and concepts that emerged during the data collection process to ensure credibility and confirmability. I incorporated member checking of one-page summaries for reliability.

The conceptual framework for this study was Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory and Piaget's (1936) theory of cognitive development. Social constructivist theory is the idea children with special needs should be educated alongside their peers, such as found in inclusion settings (Spratt & Florian, 2015). Through the theory of cognitive development, Piaget reinforced the importance of differentiated instruction and making connections to learners' background knowledge (Coady et al., 2016; Dixon et al., 2014).

This chapter focused on exploring teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. It included key terms and definitions and gave the scope, limitations, and delimitations of the study.

Chapter 2 is an in-depth literature review of primary and secondary sources used to support the nature of the study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem addressed by this study was the lack of understanding of teachers' perspectives concerning differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms in a rural school district in the southeastern United States. What made this study unique was that it focused on the perspectives of teachers in both differentiation and inclusion classrooms. The literature reviewed for this study focused on both differentiated instruction or inclusion classrooms. There was limited literature that focused on the combined topics.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) details schools' responsibilities to ensure that all students with disabilities have access to a least restrictive environment (Carson, 2015; Dixon, et al., 2014; Petersen, 2016; Shoulders & Krei, 2016). Students with disabilities should be included with their peers without disabilities to the as much as possible (Bayar, 2014; Petersen, 2016; Shoulders & Krei, 2016). Students identified as gifted should be given a challenging curriculum in the same classroom (Dixon et al., 2014; Monsen et al., 2014). By embracing the inclusion classroom environment, educators strive to raise the achievement of all learners in the same classroom (Makoelle, 2014; McLeskey et al., 2014).

It can be extraordinarily difficult to meet the needs of above average, average, and below average students in the same classroom environment (Dixon et al., 2014; Specht et al., 2016). To address this challenge, teachers depend on professional development and collaboration to develop effective instructional practices that meet the learning needs of all students (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2014; Ko & Boswell, 2013; Sokal & Sharma, 2014). Teachers became more confident in their ability to help all students reach higher levels of

achievement when they have a deeper understanding of how to differentiate instruction in inclusion settings (Joseph & John, 2014; Round, Subban, & Sharma, 2016).

My rationale throughout the review of the literature was to better understand teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. I explored how differentiated instruction in inclusion settings impacts student achievement and teacher effectiveness. The review of the literature helped me establish a background for identifying teachers' perspectives through applications of Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory and Piaget's (1936) cognitive theory. By using both Vygotsky's (1978) and Piaget's (1936) theories, I used this study's conceptual framework to explore teachers' perspectives of inclusion classrooms and the use of differentiated instruction to socially construct new knowledge. Then by identifying gaps in the literature, I discerned potential root causes of why teachers develop specific perspectives about differentiated instruction in inclusion classroom settings, and how educators can address the needs of both teachers and students.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I identified peer-reviewed journal articles for the literature review from various databases: ProQuest, EBSCO Host, Science Direct, Eric, Digital Commons, Sage Publishing, and Google Scholar. Keywords I used were differentiated instruction, inclusion classrooms, teachers' perspectives, teachers' voices, the impact of differentiated instruction or inclusion on stakeholders, reflective journaling, qualitative research, professional development's impact on student achievement, interpretive phenomenological analysis, social constructivist theory, journaling for data collection,



teacher stress, professional learning communities, IDEA, NCLB, interviews for data collection, and theory of cognitive development. Articles collected were limited to those that were published from 2014 until 2019, along with seminal studies. Two websites also gave essential material, the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) and the U.S. Department of Education.

### **Conceptual Framework/Theoretical Foundation**

#### **Social Constructivism Theory**

The first theory that supported the conceptual framework for this study was Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory. Vygotsky (1978) discovered children with special needs thrived when they could work with their nondisabled peers and learn from each other in the same environment. Vygotsky (1978) stated children will naturally learn logical reasoning and abstract thinking on their own even without the influence of school learning. Vygotsky (1978) further revealed children showed academic and social progress when learning takes place in the form of a community when interactions with others are taking place. Through social interactions, children could construct new knowledge that were beyond their capabilities in the form of imitating others in a collective activity or under the supervision of an adult (Vygotsky, 1978).

Jarvis, Bell, and Sharp (2016) noted in their research that social constructivism through interactions between individuals helped to foster inquiry and learning. Children would grow intellectually through the cultural life of a community of learners (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) recognized there was a parallel between play and school instruction, and in both contexts children developed social skills and knowledge that they

began to internalize. Vygotsky (1978) further stated a child's environment would impact their cognitive relation to the world around them. Vygotsky's social constructivist theory reinforced the most effective learning was best supported by socially collaborative learning and interaction with peers (De Jager, 2017; Mackey, 2014). This theory supported my study by providing the framework necessary to identify teachers' perspectives of the social learning that takes place with inclusion classrooms.

The IPA explored how participants made sense of their environment and identified the meaning of their personal experiences (Alase, 2017; Gill, 2014; Yin, 2013). This method was also influenced by social constructivist theory as individuals reflected on how social interactions with others impact their personal experiences (Gill, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). Through this method, emerging concepts were discovered that could often be overlooked in daily life (Yin, 2013).

### **Cognitive Development Theory**

Piaget's (1936) cognitive development theory was the second theory that constructed the conceptual framework that was used in this study. Cognitive development theory addressed the importance of differentiation instruction. Teachers must develop lesson plans that were individualized to the specific needs of each student (Dixon et al., 2014; Morgan, 2014). Piaget (1936) discovered the importance of students being able to construct new information from their pre-existing background knowledge. According to Piaget (1936), humans inherently ordered their psychological thinking into structures or schemes. Exposure to new information or experiences enabled individuals to construct new schemes (Kay & Kibble, 2016; Piaget, 1936).

By differentiating instruction, teachers could escape from a “one size fits all” methodology and tailor teaching strategies that assisted all students to grow as learners. Carol Ann Tomlinson (2014) pointed out it was essential to engage students through instruction by implementing various approaches to learning, addressing differing interests, and implementing rigorous pedagogy through complexity. Instruction must be based on a student’s previous knowledge to make connections to new ideas and concepts, thereby, differing instructional strategies to meet the needs of every child.

This current study benefited from the described framework as it directly connected to Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivist theory and Piaget’s (1936) cognitive development theory. Students have benefited from learning alongside their peers of various ability levels. By focusing on literature that supported instruction for all students in the same setting, this enabled me to determine how teachers’ perspectives of differentiated instruction are impacted in classroom settings.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable**

Scholarly literature identified relevant information that supported the research questions. These gave greater insights into differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms and the importance of collaboration in approaching challenges and creating successes. As I read primary and secondary sources, I looked for common themes in the literature and sorted the information into five main topic categories: phenomenological research, differentiated instruction, inclusion classrooms, teachers’ perspectives, gaps in the literature, and impact on stakeholders. I discussed each of these categories of research in the literature review.

## IPA research

A qualitative approach of phenomenology aided this study to identify teachers' perspectives on a given issue. Many forms of phenomenology were based on the works of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (Gill, 2014; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Quay, 2016). Husserl was often credited as the developer of descriptive phenomenology (Duckham & Schrieber, 2016; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Husserl believed phenomenology was a way of discovering the true meaning of lived experiences (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Husserl described the world of lived experiences as the "life world" which is constantly changing because of attitudes, desires, and actions of individuals (Coseru, 2015). Heidegger's work was deeply rooted in the interpretation of the human experience (Gill, 2014; Quay, 2016). Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* holds that simply being in the world through daily activity brought about inquiry into personal experiences (Horrigan-Kelley, Millar, & Dowling, 2016). IPA researchers embraced Heidegger's view of interpretation and the importance of lived experiences (Horrigan-Kelley et al., 2016).

One of the most important challenges researchers faced during phenomenological research was developing the ability to break away from their existing knowledge and search for new understandings (Finlay, 2014; Yin, 2013). Researchers must manage their subjectivity and objectivity and create a balanced approach to collecting data that is free of bias (Finlay, 2014; Yin, 2013). I worked to come to terms with my own bias on differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms, so my research does reflect its own truth (Finlay, 2014).

## **Differentiated Instruction**

Differentiated instruction is a research-based instructional strategy intended to enable teachers to meet the needs of all learners in a classroom regardless of abilities (Dixon et al., 2014; Pilten, 2016; Tomlinson, 2015). Teachers cannot expect the same instructional practices to meet the needs of all students (Strogilos, Tragoulia, Avramidis, Voulagka, & Papanikolaou, 2017; Suprayogi et al., 2017). Differentiated instruction in heterogeneous classrooms can benefit all students in the areas of academics, social skills, satisfaction with school, and attendance (Dixon et al., 2014; Pilten, 2016; Tomlinson, 2015). Teachers striving to meet the learning and emotional needs of all students will look past diversity and strive to give all students the tools required to be successful (Lockley, Jackson, Downing, & Roberts, 2017; Strogilos et al., 2017).

There were various interpretations of how differentiation was implemented (Mills et al., 2014; Tomlinson, 2015). Differentiation could be implemented at the school district level in the form of homogenous schools that address the needs of specific learners such as academic academies for high achieving students (Pilten, 2016; Suprayogi, et al., 2017). Differentiation could also occur at the school level as classes for gifted and talented students, students with special needs, or classes created based on common test scores (Dixon et al., 2014; Strogilos et al., 2017). Also, differentiation could be implemented at the classroom level when students with various abilities are placed in small groups and individual needs are addressed (Mills et al., 2014).

Differentiation may address not only the learning capabilities of students, but also cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences represented in the classroom (Strogilos et

al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2015). Differentiated instruction could impact all instructional practices in the classroom concerning the needs of diverse learners (Lockley et al., 2017; Suprayogi et al., 2017) and could be grouped into five areas: content, process, product, learning environments, and assessment (Gaitas & Martins, 2016; Tomlinson, 2015). Teachers must adapt instructional strategies and learning environments to meet the needs of all learners in a single classroom (Suprayogi et al., 2017).

Many researchers have noted teacher effectiveness through differentiated instruction was linked to higher levels of student success (Dixon et al., 2014; Florian & Graham, 2014; Little, McCoach, & Reis, 2014; Mega, Ronconi, & De Beni, 2014; Robinson, 2014; Warren & Hale, 2016). These researchers discovered teachers need a solid foundation in differentiated instruction to enable students to possess greater levels of achievement. Educators who advance their capability to implement lessons in a variety of methods can personalize lesson plans to meet the needs of all learners (Little et al., 2014; Robinson, 2014; Warren & Hale, 2016). By having a strong foundation in differentiated instruction and delivering individualized lesson plans, teachers were successfully meeting the needs of students in inclusion classrooms where there are numerous ability levels present (Warren & Hale, 2016).

Differentiation can be a challenging instructional practice for teachers to master (Coubergs et al., 2017; Dixon et al., 2014). Teachers' effectiveness in implementing differentiated instruction could be impacted by their understanding of differentiated instructional strategies (Coubergs et al., 2017; Suprayogi et al., 2017). Researchers offered varying interpretations of the significance of differentiated instruction and best

practices (Morningstar, Shogren, Lee, & Born, 2015; Tomlinson, 2015). These researchers acknowledged many representations of best practices, which were used to successfully implement differentiated strategies. Some differentiated practices included modifying curriculum, teaching strategies, resources, learning activities, and assessments to maximize learning for all students (Coubergs et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2015).

Student engagement directly impacted the effectiveness of differentiated instruction (Coubergs et al., 2017; Dixon et al., 2014). Student engagement was increased when teachers built trust in the classroom and listened to the needs of their students to make connections to their world (Mills et al., 2014; Tomlinson, 2015). Students in classrooms in which teachers effectively implemented differentiated instruction were more engaged and made more school progress than students in classrooms that did not employ differentiated instructional strategies (Little et al., 2014; Njagi, 2014; Suprayogi et al., 2017; Valiandes, 2015). Researchers have shown differentiated instruction was especially beneficial for increasing engagement of students with special needs and gifted learners (Strogilos et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2015). Teachers who understood where students were in their mastery of concepts understood the challenges students face. They were determined to use effective instructional strategies and learn these elements were essential for effectively implementing engaging differentiated instructional activities (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016; Couborgs et al., 2017; Piltan, 2016).

Some researchers also described the shortcomings of differentiated instruction. Bannister (2016) argued that differentiated direct instruction that was implemented for struggling learners was not the most effective teaching strategy. Struggling learners were

found to need more inquiry based pedagogy (Bannister, 2016). Researchers also addressed differentiated instruction emphasized the higher level students would contribute more to the classroom than lower level students (Bannister, 2016; Cohen & Lotan, 2014). Teachers have also argued planning differentiation instruction was time consuming (Coubergs et al., 2017; Dixon et al., 2014).

### **Inclusion Classrooms**

Inclusion in the classroom was defined as meeting the academic and social needs of all learners, students with and without special needs, in the same classroom (Lakkala et al., 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Inclusive classroom settings gave the opportunity for teachers to sharpen differentiated instructional skills with diverse learners (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2014; Lakkala et al., 2016). Research showed inclusion was effective for the social needs of all students, not just those identified as having special needs (Saggu, 2015; Specht et al., 2016). Students who participated in inclusion classrooms were more likely to be accepting of others' differences and respect people from diverse backgrounds (Westwood, 2018). These classrooms were created when both general education teachers and special education teachers work together to meet the various needs of all learners in the same classroom (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016; Dixon et al., 2014; Shoulders & Scott Krei, 2016). These students could be of differing cultural, socioeconomic, and perform at varying ability levels (Strogilos et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2015).

Teachers and other stakeholders have various perspectives towards differentiated instruction or inclusion classrooms. Researchers evaluated the various perspectives



teachers and other stakeholders had towards differentiated instruction or inclusion classrooms (Abenyega & Tamales, 2014; Coady et al., 2016; Paju et al., 2016). The researchers acknowledged parents and teachers had varied perspectives regarding differentiated instruction or inclusion classrooms. Researchers determined teachers with experience in inclusion classrooms had more affirmative perspectives (Coady et al., 2016; Paju et al., 2016). Educators with less experience in inclusion settings or executing differentiated instructional practices had more negative perspectives (Coady et al., 2016; Couberg et al., 2017).

Parents often have reservations about their children's participation in inclusion classrooms (Abenyega & Tamales, 2014; Westwood, 2018). De Boer and Munde (2015) reported parents of children enrolled in inclusion classrooms were uncertain how a classroom with students of mixed abilities would impact their child's academic performance. Parents of children without disabilities were anxious their children might not obtain the same attention and support given to students with disabilities (Abenyega & Tamales, 2014; Westwood, 2018). These parents were also concerned if teachers were qualified to handle the needs of students with disabilities (Vlachou, Karadimou, & Koutsogeorgou, 2016). Researchers discovered parents with negative attitudes towards inclusion could pass those same attitudes on to their children (De Boer & Munde, 2015; Vlachou et al., 2016). This could hinder the successful inclusion of students with disabilities. Parents of students with disabilities were anxious about how their child would be treated by other students in the inclusion setting but generally had a more

positive outlook towards inclusion settings (De Boer & Munde, 2015; Vlachou et al., 2016).

As mandated by IDEA, students with disabilities have the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment (Carson, 2015; Dixon et al., 2014; Gupta & Rous, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Many parents and teachers are excited regardless of disabilities, students would be able to attend the same classroom alongside their nondisabled peers (Adams, Harris, & Jones, 2016; Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016). In the classroom community, children learned to live together in society-based life (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016; Vygotsky, 1978).

The reviewed literature detailed the importance the inclusion setting had on student outcomes when students could learn alongside their non-disabled peers (Alvi & Gillies, 2015; Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016; Piltan, 2016). Teachers celebrated the differences found in their students and gave rigorous instruction that promotes student learning (Dixon et al., 2014; Nicolae, 2014; Nishimura, 2014). It was essential teachers were aware of curricular needs, learning styles, and motivation of students with disabilities (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016; Srivastava, de Boer & Pijl, 2017). Researchers noted teachers were required to understand the individual needs of their students with disabilities as designated by students' Individualized Education Plans (IEP's; Sharma & Sokal, 2016; Srivastava et al., 2017).

Teachers' attitudes towards inclusion classrooms impacted teacher effectiveness and student achievement (Bayar, 2014; Monsen et al., 2014; Srivastava et al., 2017). Teachers with positive attitudes and relations with other professionals and parents would

produce effective inclusion classroom environments (Sharma & Sokal, 2016; Srivastava et al., 2017). Research findings indicated teachers had more positive attitudes towards including students identified as gifted as compared to including students with disabilities (Monsen et al., 2014; Sharma & Sokal, 2016). Multiple researchers addressed the issue of gifted students not receiving rigorous instruction due to teachers watering down the curriculum to meet the needs of struggling students (Little et al., 2014; Morgan, 2014; Tomlinson, 2015). This could adversely impact student growth and prevent students from reaching his or her fullest potential (McLeskey et al., 2014; Valiandes, 2015).

### **Teachers' Perspectives**

My study sought new knowledge about teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms. Teachers were presented with various interview questions that focused on understanding their perspectives or their cognition of differentiated instruction. The phenomena of teachers' perspectives on differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms were identified separately throughout multiple previous research, but there was limited research on the combined topics. Researchers discovered many teachers' negative perspectives towards differentiated instruction were contributed to lack of planning time, lack of resources, parental resistance, grading concerns, classroom management, and lack of training (Gaitas & Martins, 2016). Many researchers have collected data on differentiated instruction and how it could impact student achievement (Little et al., 2014; Morningstar et al., 2015). This reinforced that teachers with negative perspectives towards differentiated instruction could adversely impact student achievement (Goddard, Goddard, & Kim, 2015).

Multiple research articles focused on teachers' perspectives of inclusion settings.

Researchers discovered inclusion policies were not always practiced by educators of inclusion classrooms (De Matthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Roberts & Simpson, 2016; Round et al., 2016). The frustration of a lack of resources led many teachers to adapt or create curriculum to meet the needs of their diverse students (Gaitas & Martins, 2016). Educators felt more professional development was needed to successfully meet the needs of students with disabilities in inclusion settings (Gupta & Rous, 2016).

**Pre-service teacher education.** Researchers found it was essential to understand teachers' perspectives towards differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms to understand the needs of teachers and students (Bayar, 2014; Dixon et al., 2014; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2014; Westwood, 2018). Researchers revealed many teachers felt inadequately prepared to teach differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms (Paju et al., 2016; Spencer, 2016; Werts et al., 2014). Researchers delivered information that recognized explicit apprehensions of teacher candidates associated with the execution of differentiated instruction (Joseph & John, 2014; Moore, 2015; Round et al., 2016). Several of the fears were directly associated with the lack of professional development regarding differentiated instructional practices, particularly in pre-service programs. Repeatedly, teachers enter education positions with minimal background knowledge of the resources required to meet the needs of all students in inclusion settings. The researchers discussed the significance of professional development for teachers of inclusion classrooms, and how schools can deliver professional development opportunities (Joseph & John, 2014; Moore, 2015; Round et al., 2016).

Other studies addressed the role professional development had on teachers and their capability to provide effective differentiated instructional strategies in the classroom (Bayar, 2014; De Neve et al., 2015; Gupta & Rous, 2016; Guerra, 2014). As new research-based instructional strategies are discovered, school districts discovered ways to deliver professional development for teachers to increase their understanding of how to implement those strategies (Bayar, 2014; De Neve et al., 2015; Gupta & Rous, 2016). Some teachers felt pre-service programs did not adequately prepare educators for the challenges that accompany differentiated instruction in inclusion settings, therefore, requiring professional development opportunities (Fisher, 2013; Florian & Graham; 2014; Joseph & John, 2014; Monsen et al., 2014; Moore, 2015).

Research findings indicated instructors of pre-service teacher education programs did not always model differentiated instruction in their own teaching strategies (Lockley et al., 2017). Pre-service teachers would greatly benefit from instructors modeling differentiated strategies in teacher education programs, so they would have a better understanding of how to implement differentiated strategies in the P-12 classroom (Lockley et al., 2017). Teacher education programs sought to prepare new teachers with the knowledge to effectively teach content at a rigorous level that met the needs of students that would be able to excel, and at the same time, they supported the development of struggling learners (Gupta & Rous, 2016; Shoulders & Scott Krei, 2016; Tomlinson, 2015).

**Teachers' voices.** Much of the literature that was reviewed reiterated the importance of listening to teachers' voices (Rentner et al., 2016; Sokal & Sharma, 2014).

Researchers determined principals who gave regular positive feedback, had open communication, gave support and unity, used his/her power for the good of the school, and shared values for the benefit of the school had teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy (DuFour & DuFour, 2016; Elisha-Primo, Godfrad, & Sandler, 2015; Kass, 2013; Richardson, 2014). Listening to the voices of teachers has the potential to become a professional development opportunity (Taylor, 2017). Teachers who expressed their concerns with leadership and other colleagues could problem solve specific situations and contribute to a successful plan of intervention (Taylor, 2017).

Teachers' feedback was an excellent resource for administrators to use to have a better understanding of what was going on in the classroom (Elisha-Primo, Sandler, & Godfrad, 2015). Policymakers believed teachers were the most critical resources who were available to help explain what was currently going on in schools (DuFour & DuFour, 2016; Elisha-Primo et al., 2015). When teachers strived to have their voices heard, they were able to project real-life challenges and accomplishments that took place in the classroom and enabled administrators to form a clearer picture of the needs of teachers and students (Kass, 2013; Richardson, 2014).

The research conducted by Rentner et al. (2016) identified many of the frustrations teachers experienced. Teachers felt district and school leaders were not hearing their concerns. 76% of teachers felt their voices were not heard at the district level and 94% felt their voices were not heard at the state and national levels (Rentner et al., 2014). The stress and frustrations teachers felt are having an adverse effect on teacher attrition. Owens (2015) conducted a survey of public school teachers for the southeast

state's Department of Education to examine the causes of high teacher attrition rates. In the state, 44% of public school teachers left the profession in the first 5 years. 66% of public school teachers were unlikely to encourage high school graduates to seek a career in education. One of the top reasons cited by teachers leaving the field concerned a lack of teacher participation in decisions related to the profession (Owen, 2015).

### **Gaps in the Literature**

**Missing from the literature.** Careful analysis and review of the literature identified a gap between studies focused on teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction and studies focused on teachers' perspectives of inclusion classrooms. There was a shortage of articles available that centered on teachers' perspectives on differentiated instruction inside inclusion classrooms; therefore, a need existed to explore what were teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. Teachers have been challenged over the past two decades to become effective at implementing differentiated instructional strategies, and at the same time, adjusted to classroom settings that include students with disabilities (Dixon et al., 2014; Tomlinson, 2015). In the past, most students with disabilities were served all day in resource classes and seldom interacted with their nondisabled peers. To ensure all students are reaching higher levels of achievement, teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms needed to be identified (Sharma & Sokal, 2016).

**Professional development opportunities.** A review of the literature revealed it was the responsibility of administrators to ensure continual professional development was given to meet the needs of its teachers in differentiated instructional strategies and

inclusion (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2014; Ko & Boswell, 2013; Sokal & Sharma, 2014).

Teachers who had specific training in the instruction of students with special needs have much greater confidence in meeting the needs of those students (Gupta & Rous, 2016; McWhirter, Brandes, Williams-Diehm, & Hackett, 2016; Paju et al., 2016; Round et al., 2016; Sokal & Sharma, 2014). Professional development helped to increase teacher knowledge and sustained effective daily teaching practices (Lakkala et al., 2016; Nishimura, 2014). Professional development could include observations, the collaboration between peers, and feedback from administrators that would result in educators forming a greater understanding of how to best meet students' needs (Nishimura, 2014; Taylor, 2017).

Change is extraordinarily difficult, but teachers to be willing to explore new instructional practices to meet the needs of all learners that could require a shift in beliefs, materials, and perception (Dixon et al., 2014; Gupta & Rous, 2016). When leaders took the time to provide positive support for instruction, teachers reported feeling more capable of implementing differentiated instructional strategies in inclusion settings (Dixon et al., 2014; Gupta & Rous, 2016). Administrators need to offer greater opportunities for professional development (Bayar, 2014; De Matthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Gupta & Rous, 2016). By collecting and analyzing data through professional development, teachers could begin to address the individual needs of their students and develop needs-based instruction (De Neve et al., 2015; Nishimura, 2014).

**Instructional needs.** Per the literature review, teachers were concerned with the lack of time for effective instructional planning, collaboration with other teachers, and



lack of resources (De Neve et al., 2015; Nicolae, 2014; Round et al., 2016; Sokal & Sharma, 2014). Multiple studies revealed teachers felt there was not enough time for adequate planning or instructional practices (Barr, 2014; Pilten, 2016; Werts et al., 2014). Teachers must be given time to plan effectively (Pilten, 2016; Werts et al., 2014). When teachers were given the opportunity to explore research based instructional strategies that have shown to be effective practices in inclusion classrooms, they were given the tools needed to increase student achievement (Barr, 2014). Research based instructional strategies would also give teachers the confidence needed to embrace instructional practices and increase a more positive mindset towards differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms (Gupta & Rous, 2016).

Co-teaching is an inclusion model in which both the general education teacher and special education teacher work collaboratively to meet the needs of all students in the same classroom (Hamdan, Anuar, & Khan, 2016; Nishimura, 2014; Shoulders & Scott Krei, 2016). The effectiveness of co-teachers could be negatively impacted if there was a weak relationship between teachers (Hamdan et al., 2016; Shoulders & Scott Krei, 2016). Teachers who had difficulty collaborating with others tended to develop negative attitudes towards co-teaching practices and resulted in poor communication, ineffective planning, and adversely impacted student achievement (Shoulders & Scott Krei, 2016). Co-teachers must be given professional development opportunities that would provide strategies for effective co-teaching instruction and given time to effectively plan lessons (Hamdan et al., 2016; Sokal & Sharma, 2014). Teachers who worked with a diverse

student population needed to take the time to implement effective instructional practices to meet the academic and social needs of all learners (Lakkala et al., 2016).

Teachers also have limited resources to guide their instructional practices (Dixon et al., 2014; Sharma & Sokal, 2016). Teachers must learn to “teach-up” to provide a challenging curriculum for higher learners. Educators must scaffold students who are struggling and bring them up to higher expectations (Dixon et al., 2014; Tomlinson, 2015). Having enough resources was a critical factor in improving student outcomes, overcoming challenges, and creating successes (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; McLeskey et al., 2014). Teachers must learn to maximize their use of their limited resources, so students are given effective individualized instruction (Shoulders & Scott Krei, 2016; Sokal & Sharma, 2014).

**Professional learning communities (PLCs).** When professionals took the opportunity to collaborate, they were investing in authentic instructional practices facilitating successful inclusion settings resulting in improved student outcomes (Dixon et.al., 2014; Gupta & Rous, 2016). Instituting cooperative planning time, teachers could facilitate effective instructional strategies in safe environments where they would be able to voice concerns and brainstorm to create successful teaching practices (De Neve et al., 2015; Nishimura, 2014). Effective collaborative planning resulted in positive changes to teachers’ attitudes and improved the social and academic progress of all students (De Neve et al., 2015; Nishmura, 2014). Collaborative planning resulted in the collective responsibility for student learning and can result in a shared vision (De Neve et al., 2015).

Through collaboration, co-teachers and general education teachers can combine their knowledge, so they can become more successful at meeting the academic and emotional needs of their students (Hamdan et al., 2016; Solis et al., 2012). There were other factors that can impact differentiated instruction effectiveness. These factors can include teachers' lack of knowledge of available resources, little time for lesson planning, and difficulty collaborating with other teachers (Suprayogi et al., 2017; Werts et al., 2014).

Teachers can come together as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and collaborate on best practices (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016; De Neve, Devos, & Tuytens, 2015; DuFour & DuFour, 2016; Walton et al., 2014). It was imperative general education teachers and special education teachers collaborated and applied their expertise in content and instructional practices to develop a curriculum that was adaptable to the needs of all learners (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016; Tomlinson, 2015). A lack of expertise and professional development for general and special education teachers, few resources, lack of collaborative planning time, and weak support from administrators lead to greater difficulties in the inclusion setting (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016; Suprayogi et al., 2017).

It was pertinent PLCs reached out to new and experienced teachers to provide resources for differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms (DeNeve & Devos, 2017). Researchers discovered teachers often did not share resources or teaching strategies due to feeling they competed with other teachers, especially when evaluating test scores (DuFour & DuFour, 2016). Researchers revealed a school's ability to increase teacher

learning was grounded in its ability to function as a competent professional learning community (DeNeve & Devos, 2017; DuFour & DuFour, 2016). PLCs were established when teachers shared ideas, gave feedback, and sought reflective learning to encourage professional growth with all stakeholders (DeNeve & Devos, 2017; DuFour & DuFour, 2016). For new teachers, the PLC gave extensive support and resources to help with instructional practices (DeNeve & Devos, 2017; DuFour & DuFour, 2016). PLCs also provided experienced teachers with the ability to explore new ideas and troubleshoot with other professionals the challenges that were faced in the classroom (DuFour & DuFour, 2016).

### **Impact on Stakeholders**

**Family.** Parents' opinions and beliefs were essential to the inclusion process (Soponaru, Păduraru, Dumbrava, Stărică, & Iorga, 2016). Parents and guardians of children with disabilities face tremendous challenges when determining whether to send their children to inclusive schools (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2013; Agbenyega & Tamales, 2014; De Boer & Munde, 2015). Parents struggled with the quality of education their children with disabilities may have received in inclusive settings (Agbenyega & Tamales, 2014; Westwood, 2018). Parents also worried about their children being identified as “different” from the other students and stereotyped (Agbenyega & Tamales, 2014; Gupta & Rous, 2016; Soponaru et al., 2016).

Multiple barriers existed about parents of students without disabilities sharing the same learning environment as students with disabilities (Gupta & Rous, 2016; Soponaru et al., 2016). Parents expressed their concerns about how other parents and teachers

resented the time and resources their child required (Schultz, Able, Sreckovic, & White, 2016). Researchers discovered the earlier children began participating in inclusive environments, the greater the acceptance of their peers (Soponaru et al., 2016). Parents with children without disabilities also reported their children benefited greatly from sharing the same classroom as children with disabilities. They described their children as more understanding of the needs of others and accepting of individuals viewed as “different” (Vlachou et al., 2016).

Teachers and parents must learn to collaborate on meeting the needs of individual students to be the most effective (Adams et al., 2016; Schultz et al., 2016). Research indicated students whose parents were actively involved in schools had better outcomes related to academics and peer relations (Schultz et al., 2016). Lack of communication, conflicting ideas and beliefs, tensions, or broken relationships, could adversely impede the collaboration between teachers and parents and negatively impact the child’s school experience (Adams et al., 2016; Schultz et al., 2016). Teacher and parent collaboration helped to improve student learning thereby helping them reach their fullest potential (Adams et al., 2016; Schultz et al., 2016). Teachers and parents can collaborate to determine areas of weaknesses that can be targeted through appropriate goals and objectives (Adams et al., 2016; Schultz et al., 2016).

It was essential teachers and parents have strong communication practices that fostered positive experiences for students (Adams et al., 2016; Schultz et al., 2016). Parents wanted teachers who were knowledgeable about their child’s disability and effective intervention strategies who would collaborate and advocate alongside them to

support their child and their child's IEP (Schultz et al., 2016). One of the strongest positive influences on students' academic success outside of school was effective communication between teachers and parents (Kraft & Rogers, 2015). Communication with parents could be achieved through phone calls, parent and teacher conferences, newsletters, and technology-based communications such as emails, websites, and text messaging (Kraft & Rogers, 2015).

**Student achievement.** Teachers' perspectives can impact student performance (Hunter-Johnson & Newton, 2014; Monsen et al., 2014). Teachers with positive attitudes and confidence in teaching abilities were more effective educators of inclusion classrooms (Sharma & Sokal, 2016). Researchers discovered perspectives of teachers towards inclusion and differentiated teaching strategies directly impacted student achievement (Fisher, 2013; Shoulders & Scott Krei, 2016; Werts et al., 2014). When teachers had an optimistic perspective of differentiated instruction in inclusion settings, student success was positively impacted. Researchers found teachers with negative perspectives towards differentiation instruction could adversely impact student achievement (Morgan, 2014; Shoulders & Scott Krei, 2016; Warren & Hale, 2016). Teacher perspectives are an integral part of a positive or negative school experience for students. Studies showed with effective differentiated instruction, student achievement rose (Little et al., 2014; Morningstar et al., 2015; Shoulders & Scott Krei, 2016; Valiandes, 2015).

Roy, Guay, and Valois (2015) conducted a study to investigate how low achieving students perceived their academic self-concept as compared to other higher achieving

students in an inclusion setting. The researchers found effective differentiated instruction was critical in helping low achieving students maintain a positive outlook on their academic performance. By differentiating instruction, students' individual needs were addressed, and students experienced greater opportunities for success. When students felt successful, their confidence rose, and they became more willing to explore more challenging concepts without the anxiety of the fear of failure (Morningstar et al., 2015; Shoulders & Scott Krei, 2016; Valiandes, 2015).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

It was the very uniqueness found in teachers' perspectives that fostered positive collaboration and higher student achievement through differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms (Gupta & Rous, 2016; Hunter-Johnson & Newton, 2014). When teachers strove to meet the academic and social needs of all learners, they became pivotal in the process of helping students grow both as learners and individuals (Dixon et al., 2014; Monsen et al., 2014). It was essential teachers learned to step out of their comfort zones and explore new teaching strategies that met the needs of all learners in their classroom (Alvi & Gillies, 2015; Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016; Pilten, 2016).

The literature helped to bring a deeper understanding of the need for teachers to have their voices heard concerning differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. It can become very comfortable for teachers to teach to the average student and fail to provide the extension or remediation higher learners and struggling learners require to create successes and overcome challenges (Coubergs et al., 2017; Suprayogi et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2015). Administrators could provide practical professional development

opportunities that enhanced instructional practices and provided teachers with the opportunity to voice their concerns and ideas (Dixon et.al., 2014; Gupta & Rous, 2016). When student achievement rose, families experienced the success of their children through the growth of their confidence and accomplishments (Adams et al., 2016; Schultz et al., 2016).

I discovered through my study unknown perspectives of K-3 teachers implementing differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. By focusing only on K-3 teachers, this study uncovered perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms that were specific to early childhood education. This identified a gap in practice.

In Chapter 3, I provide greater insight into the methodology implemented for this study. This included the research design and rationale of my study. I also include details describing the role of the researcher. Chapter 3 focuses on the components of the methodology. This consists of participant selection, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment, participation, data analysis, data collection plan, and data analysis plan. I also discuss the trustworthiness of my study. This identifies the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of my study. I also include ethical procedures and the steps that were taken to protect participants.



### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this IPA was to explore teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms in a rural school district in the southeastern United States. When considering differentiated instruction, I discovered there is a plethora of research about differentiated instruction or inclusion classrooms. For example, students in classrooms in which teachers implemented differentiated instruction effectively were more engaged and made more school progress than students in classrooms that did not employ differentiated instructional strategies (Little et al., 2014; Njagi, 2014; Suprayogi et al., 2017; Valiandes, 2015). When considering inclusion as mandated by IDEA, students with disabilities have the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment (Carson, 2015; Dixon et al., 2014; Gupta & Rous, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2005). However, there was limited research on teachers' perspectives on the use of differentiated strategies in inclusion classrooms.

In Chapter 3, I explain the research methods data obtained through one to one interviews and reflective journals that detail the personal experiences of teachers in inclusion classrooms and their perspectives of differentiated instruction. Purposeful sampling included of both special education and general education teachers. Reflective journaling was used to record their experiences in the classroom after the interviews. Using these data, I identified common themes that gave a deeper understanding of their challenges and successes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). I used data collected from this study to construct new knowledge about teachers' perspectives on differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. Thematic data analysis used a priori coding, open

coding, and axial coding to look for essential themes. The themes that emerged throughout the data analysis were identified and recorded. As I identified emerging themes, themes were cross-referenced with demographic information to reveal any common trends among participants' responses. This step was important to show if demographic information was linked with certain perspectives or other types of information.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

I used the (RQ) and two (SQs) to guide my study.

RQ: What are teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms?

SQ1. What are the challenges and successes teachers encounter in planning and using differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms?

SQ2: What do teachers believe will improve their use of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms?

A qualitative approach was used to analyze the collected data. By analyzing interviews and reflective journal responses of participants, I identified emerging concepts that helped to explain teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. Member checks gave participants the opportunity to review a one-page summary of data analysis (Thomas, 2017).

Using IPA, this study focused on teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. IPA was first developed by psychologist Jonathan Smith (1996) and has roots in psychology, but its use has expanded to the field of

educational research (Jeog & Othman, 2016; Noon, 2018). Educational experiences are inherently subjective which makes them ideal for IPA research (Noon, 2018). IPA allows the researcher to recognize learning and teaching experiences from the teachers' and students' personal perspectives (Jeog & Othman, 2016). IPA researchers recognize the importance of using subjective experiences as scientific data (Alase, 2017; Noon, 2018). IPA is supported by hermeneutic phenomenology which centers on the way individuals perceive their environments (Crowther, Ironside, Spencer, & Smythe, 2017; Noon, 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2007). Another element of IPA is idiography. Idiography is an in-depth approach to how individuals make sense to a given phenomenon in their environment, and it allows for individuals' narratives to be personalized (Jeog & Othman, 2016; Noon, 2018).

Teachers face many challenges when pursuing their goals of helping students accomplish higher levels of student achievement (Dixon et al., 2014; Specht et al., 2016). Although teachers are encountering a great diversity of needs and struggles in educational settings (Rentner et al., 2016), the rationale of this study was to focus on one specific area that inclusion teachers are experiencing daily and to discover their perspective of their personal experiences implementing differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms. Inclusion classrooms are steeped in diversity. Differences in gender, socio-economic background, culture, and ability levels all combine to create an environment that required teachers to be conscientious of the needs of each learner (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2014; Lakkala et al., 2016).

### **Role of the Researcher**

I collected all data throughout this study and remained unbiased and fully focused throughout the data collection process. This was accomplished by using a reflective journal for reflexivity. The reflective journal provided an opportunity to recognize and set aside any biases (Burgess, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2016). I contacted the district Superintendent to gain permission to perform the study and seek participants. I had no supervisory relationship with any of the participants of this study. They were easily accessible because everyone involved in this study worked in the same school district. I obtained a list of participants that meet criteria from the principals of one elementary school in the district I am not associated with. I addressed potential participants via personal email and gave a phone number and email address where they could reach me. I requested individuals interested in participating in the study contact me in 72 hours. As potential participants contacted me, I set up interview times with them. Before each interview, I provided and explained the consent forms and answered any questions.

During scheduled interviews, I remained on topic and did not take part in any sidebar conversations using a structured approach. Interviews took place in a private conference room located at the school. Locating interviews in a private conference room minimized distractions. Interviews were strategically scheduled to ensure they did not overlap, and confidentiality was maintained.

I asked questions as described in the list of interview questions (see Appendix A). I recorded interviews by using a digital voice recorder application. My role as a researcher included taking notes during interviews and transcribing interviews during the

data analysis process. I included audit trails to describe all of the steps taken from the beginning of my research to the development and reporting of findings. This helped document everything that was completed throughout my research.

I removed my personal experiences with differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms by bracketing results and focusing only on the participants' responses (Sorsa, Kiikala, & Åstedt-Kurki, 2015). I also used a reflective journal to avoid inferring assumptions and biases for reflexivity. This ensured the voices of the participants and not my own were heard resulting in trustworthiness.

Participants were asked not to share information on the study until after the study was published. Confidentiality was held in the highest regard throughout the entire research process.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection**

Through purposeful sampling, I invited 15 K-3 teachers of inclusion classrooms to participate. They included five general education and five special education teachers. Participants were not compensated in any way, including monetary payment, refreshments, or gifts. Participants took part in one to one interviews to provide first-hand responses of their personal experiences as teachers of inclusion classrooms and their use of differentiated instructional practices. Participants followed their interviews with reflective journaling for 7 days to record their reflections of phenomena with differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. If there were not enough participants from one school setting, I had permission from the school district superintendent to

contact other elementary school principals to seek other participants fitting the criteria of this study.

I gave consent forms to all participants to maintain high ethical standards and clear expectations as set forth by Walden University Institutional Review Board (Walden University, 2017). In the consent form, there was an explanation of the purpose of this study and a reminder participants' contributions to the study were entirely voluntary (see Yin, 2013) and no monetary payments were awarded. Any harms, risks, or benefits of the research that might impact participants were also identified. I gave participants the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time with no repercussions, in which case the data collected from them would be destroyed.

The sample size was chosen from a K-5 faculty of 39 general and special education teachers. From that population, I invited teachers who are currently teaching inclusion classrooms in K-3 to participate in the study. There are six general education teachers and three special education teachers teaching inclusion classes in K-3. The participants do not work closely with me, which removed potential bias.

### **Instrumentation**

I created the instrumentations implemented in my study. I used Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory and Piaget's (1936) cognitive development theory to formulate the research questions that guided my study. Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory supported all learners regardless of their ability to excel when learning in the same environment. Piaget's (1936) cognitive development theory guided my research questions on differentiation instruction that will build upon students'

preexisting knowledge. The combined theories contributed to the research questions focusing on the combined topics of both differentiated instruction and inclusion classrooms. This supported my research questions that were seeking to construct new knowledge about differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. Instrumentations used were one to one interview questions (see Appendix A) based on the research questions of this study. Answers to interview questions were analyzed in the pursuit of discovering recurring themes.

Participants also wrote in their reflective journals for 7 days, they were able to provide a more personalized understanding of their everyday subjectivity, emotions, and events. I reviewed with participants the reflective journal keeping process. I discussed what to expect in terms of outcomes and provide reflective journal keeping guidelines. Once reflective journals were collected, they were transcribed using Microsoft Word and uploaded to MAXQDA for storage. Content validity was accomplished through the various stages of instrument development (Creswell, 2009). I began by planning the purpose of the instrument and considering the participants from purposeful sampling. I identified the objective of the instrument and evaluated its alignment with the conceptual framework. Construct validity was established when meaningful data was identified and fully measured the construct of teachers' perspectives. Participants received a one-page study summary after data was analyzed for member checking.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Participants were selected based on their experience of working in inclusion settings by purposeful sampling. I spoke to each potential participant and explained the

study. Participants who volunteered to take part in the study were given consent forms. I chose the study site based on the number of qualified staff identified by the principal. This site provided the purposeful sample required to collect valid information. I collected data from one to one interviews and reflective journals each participant completed. All the interviews took place in the school's conference room for privacy and convenience for participants. All the interviews took place over two days. I attempted to conduct each interview in a 30-60-minute time frame but allowed for extra time as needed. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

### **Data Collection Plan**

To collect comprehensive and descriptive data from each participant, I used both one to one interviews and reflective journals. Interviews consisted of open-ended questions to elicit data about teachers' personal experiences in inclusion classrooms and their use of differentiated instructional strategies. The in-depth interview format allowed participants to share their experiences, opinions, and insights with differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. Participants filled out a demographic form as a resource for the study during each interview. On this form, participants identified their number of years of experience, level of education, race, gender, and age. I reminded participants they would be given a code to protect their identities. Audit trails were used to document all of the steps that are taken throughout the research process.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Data analysis was grounded in the conceptual framework by identifying themes related to elements of social constructivist and cognitive development theories. By using



Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory and Piaget's (1936) cognitive development theory, I focused on themes that emerged throughout the data. Data were thoroughly analyzed before any general statements are made (Noon, 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). I used a priori coding, open coding, and axial coding to make connections between the topics and themes discovered in the data through careful investigation and constant comparisons. I sought to create new knowledge on how social constructs in the inclusion setting impact the personal experiences of teachers.

Data was collected through one to one interviews and reflective journals. I also kept a reflective research journal for ideas and concepts that emerged during the data collection process to ensure credibility and confirmability. This allowed information from all events that happened in the field and personal reflections in connection to the study to be recorded. All interviews were audio recorded using a voice recording application. I transcribed all recordings word-for-word using Microsoft Word and uploaded transcripts to MAXQDA computer software to ensure confidentiality and storage. I began with a priori coding to establish themes based on the research question and sub-questions. To find deeper meaning in the data, a priori coding helped me identify overarching themes that connected data to the conceptual framework of this study. In phenomenology research, a method is required to inquire of a phenomenon to reveal a priori structures of consciousness (Englander, 2016). A priori codes included perspectives, challenges, successes, improvements, and professional development.

Once transcripts and notes were read, re-read, and annotated, a priori codes were identified, and concepts were categorized as they are related to each of the research

questions. This was accomplished using hand coding to organize identified themes and identifying commonalities and differences. Hand coding enabled me to implement creative coding that allowed hierarchical code structures to be created based on relationships between identified codes. Hand coding helped to create top level codes and sublevel codes. This enabled me to create meaningful groups of data.

The purpose of coding was to methodically move through higher order conceptual levels and determine similar and dissimilar concepts (Yin, 2011). I used open coding to organize data, and I used the information to provide each participant a unique voice to enable their ideas to emerge from their interviews, rather than preexisting ideas from literature. I also used open coding to investigate emerging themes on the cognitive experiences of teachers developing differentiated instructional strategies for students of mixed abilities, culture, and socioeconomic backgrounds. I followed with axial coding to determine what connections exist in the data. This helped to further refine categories.

Once all data were analyzed and hand coded, I began quantifying data to create a table to visually represent information and make comparisons between texts. I used quantified data to make conclusions in relation to the research question and identified any discrepant cases that occurred. Inconsistencies or discrepancies in data were reported to reduce bias and support the credibility and reliability of my study. Discrepant cases occur when the researcher discovers contradictory data, or the viewpoints of participants differ from the reviewed literature (Yin, 2011).

I examined occurring themes and determined how they are relatable to the RQ: What are teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms?

I investigated themes that identified what are teachers' personal experiences they encounter while planning and using differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms that may influence their perspectives. I also looked for themes that revealed what teachers believed helped improve their use of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. I sought to determine if emerging themes revealed what influences current professional development opportunities had on differentiated instructional practices in inclusion classes. If a discrepant theme emerged, I sought to identify specific causes related to the theme and used the information to further detail findings.

### **Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

I used a reflective journal to write down thoughts and theories that emerged during the data collection process to ensure credibility. The reflective journal allowed for transparency and an opportunity to recognize and set aside any biases through reflexivity (Burgess et al., 2016; Filep et. al., 2018). I wanted to increase my level of self-awareness and maintain trustworthiness throughout the study. Interview notes were detailed, and audio recorded for quality assurance. Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed exactly verbatim. Participants received a one-page study summary after data was analyzed for member checking. These measures helped to support credible results and conclusions of this study.

#### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the extent of similarity between the research site and other sites as determined by other researchers and readers (Anney, 2014; Creswell, 2009).

Transferability was accomplished from the results of a purposeful sampling of participants that were selected. Participants included educators with a vast range of experience. Participants had variations in educational backgrounds. Some participants possessed advanced degrees. All participants were qualified and teaching certificates in good standing. I provided thick descriptions and comprehensive details of setting, participants, interactions, culture, resources, and policies, so other researchers and readers can make connections from this study's findings to their own personal experiences (Anney, 2014; Creswell, 2009).

### **Dependability**

Dependability was achieved in this study by maintaining consistent procedures during the interview process and data collection. The interview questions were open-ended yet specific, reducing the risk of unrelated conversations. Questions were read the same and in the same order for all interviews (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Bracketing techniques were implemented, so I was able to set aside personal views and assumptions (Sorsa et al., 2015). Bracketing is a tool to help increase awareness and make data driven choices (Sorsa et al., 2015). Bracketing enables researchers to set aside their own assumptions, so the phenomenon can be better understood without bias (Sorsa et al., 2015). Member checks gave participants the opportunity to review a one-page summary of data analysis (Thomas, 2017). I concentrated on not allowing my perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion settings to create any preconceptions or skew data collected. Overall, the use of audit trails gave a step-by-step guide of the data collection process regarding this research and its interpretation.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability is the degree the findings of the research study can be confirmed by other researchers (Anney, 2014; Creswell, 2009; Korstjens, & Moser, 2018). I used both audit trails and a reflective journal to ensure confirmability. Audit trails allowed me to transparently describe the steps taken from the beginning of the study to the development and reporting of findings defining a research path (Anney, 2014; Creswell, 2009; Korstjens, & Moser, 2018). A rationale was given for each decision that was made throughout the research process. By implementing a reflective journal for reflexivity, interpretations were based on my personal preferences and views but were secured in the data. Reflexivity is the ability of the researcher to think critically about his or her role as a researcher and recognize the connection to the participants, and how the connection affects participant's responses to questions (Cooper, Fleisher, & Cotton, 2012; Filep et. al, 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

**Ethical Procedures**

As the first step to ensuring ethical protection for participants, I completed the human research protection training given by Walden University. Next, I contacted the district superintendent to receive prior approval to conduct a research study at a local elementary school. He responded by offering his full support. A letter was given to the principal detailing the research study and procedures. At the same time, approval from the Institutional Review Board of Walden University was obtained to use human subjects in this research study (Approval No. 11-19-19-0536695). I have been trained and CITI certified. All participants received consent agreements, and procedures were thoroughly

explained. To protect the employment location of the participants, the researcher used only the geographic designation of school district in the southeastern United States. Participants were given a copy of interview questions before the interviews to help make the process as comfortable as possible. Participants were assigned code names (T1, T2, T3 ...) to protect their identities. All audio recordings, transcripts, and reflective journals were stored in a locked filing cabinet throughout the research process. I am the only person that has access to the data, and all data collected will be destroyed after 5 years.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 3, I discussed the IPA of teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms. Included in this section was a rationalization of this design, and the role of the researcher. The methodology was also described. This portion included the process of participant selection through purposeful sampling. One to one interviews and reflective journals were discussed for the use of data collection instruments. Procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection were also identified. I included the data collection plan and data analysis processes. Trustworthiness was addressed, and I focused on the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study. I included how participants would be ethically protected throughout the study.

In Chapter 4, I focus on The data analysis and its relation to the research questions.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of the IPA was to explore teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. Participants included both general education and special education teachers in K-3 classrooms. I conducted one to one interviews with each participant, and participants maintained a reflective journal for 7 days. Once all interviews were completed and journals collected, I transcribed each interview and journal entry verbatim using Microsoft Word. I uploaded the documents to MAXQDA for storage.

Chapter 4 is divided into four sections that detail (a) participants' demographic information, (b) the data collection process, (c) data analysis process, and (d) data analysis outcomes. I used the following RQ and two SQs to guide my study.

RQ: What are teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms?

SQ1. What are the challenges and successes teachers encounter in planning and using differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms?

SQ2: What do teachers believe will improve their use of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms?

### **Setting**

This study took place in the southeastern region of the United States. The participants worked in a rural, Title I, K-5 elementary school. Invitations were sent to 15 general education and special education teachers of inclusion classrooms in K-3; nine agreed. I emailed participants a copy of the consent form for review. Each participant

reviewed and signed the consent form before the interview was conducted. Interview locations and times were communicated through email.

### **Demographics**

Nine educators agreed to participate in my study. All were female. Six were general education teachers and three were special education teachers. All participants worked in the same elementary school located in the southeastern United States in grades K-3. All were certified to teach K-5 Early Childhood Education. Three had certifications in Special Education General Curriculum P-12. All worked with students in a K-3 inclusion classroom. Their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 16 years. To maintain confidentiality, each participant was given a code: T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8, and T9.

### **Data Collection**

The interviews lasted 50-60 minutes. Data collection process took approximately 2 weeks. All one to one interviews were audio recorded using the Voice Memo application on my iPhone. The interviews began with a review of the consent form, and each participant signed the consent before moving forward with the interview. Each participant was reminded that she could stop the interview and withdraw from the study at any time.

Each interview began with a review of the study's purpose and research question. The participants were asked questions based on the research question (see Appendix A). I maintained a reflective journal to write down notes during each interview for reflexivity. At the conclusion of each interview, I informed each participant they would receive a



one-page summary of the results at the end of the study for member checking purposes. I explained if they had any questions, I would be available. I ended each interview thanking the participant for their time and contribution.

Following one to one interview, participants were given journals to record daily reflections for 7 days. Each journal contained writing prompts to help guide their reflections (Appendix B). After 7 days, participants placed journals in sealed envelopes, and I personally picked up journals from each participant. As I reviewed journals, I transcribed each page line by line and uploaded it to MAXQDA for storage. I continued to maintain a reflective journal to jot down my own personal thoughts and ideas for reflexivity.

Each audio recording was transcribed verbatim. After 7 days, journal entries were collected and transcribed verbatim. All transcriptions were uploaded into MAXQDA for data storage. All printed copies of transcripts were stored in a locking filing cabinet. The steps of data collection were followed precisely from the data collection plan. There were no unusual circumstances encountered during data collection.

### **Data Analysis**

Once interviews were completed and journals returned from the nine participants, I transcribed all text using Microsoft Word and uploaded information into MAXQDA for storage. I read each text line by line and began hand coding codes using thematic data analysis. I followed the six-phases of thematic analysis process (see Braun & Clarke, 2012; see Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The phases included a) familiarizing yourself with the data; b) generating initial codes; c) searching for themes; d) reviewing potential

themes; e) defining and naming themes, and f) producing the report. There were no unexpected incidences that impacted the data analysis process.

### **Phase 1: Familiarizing Yourself with the Data**

After reviewing transcripts from interviews and journal entries three times, I hand-color-coded specific excerpts of information that correlated with a priori codes. A priori coding labels included perspectives, challenges, successes, improvements, and professional development. I began with a priori coding to guide data analysis as I carefully read the texts. A priori codes were created through a deductive approach using the research questions based on the conceptual framework. I also utilized knowledge gained through my literature review to identify key categories that could be present in the collected data.

Using hand coding, I meticulously analyzed each transcript and identified codes that connected to a priori coding through raw data. For example, a priori code perspectives connected to Participant T3 response, “Fear of being judged. If they (administrators) know I’m struggling with differentiation, the next time administrators are in my room, they are going to be looking for that.” This response directly connected to a teacher’s perspective of how administrators view differentiation as a weakness if teachers admit to struggling with differentiated concepts. This directly impacts the lived experiences of teachers in the classroom.

As I read each transcript, I created notes in the margins to help identify what key concepts or repeated phrases were located in the text. I also noted if any concepts directly related to the a priori codes that were created previously. All notations were made in the

margins of the text and were color coded. This phase enabled me to identify key concepts that were related to the research question and begin to organize data.

### **Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes**

I began to reexamine transcripts to identify other codes through open coding and reduce data. I selected a specific color to represent each code that was identified. I searched for repetitive words, phrases, and concepts. I used orange to highlight statements that expressed concern for students' well-being. Medium blue was used to highlight statements referring to teacher confidence. Any statements referring to not enough time to plan was highlighted in yellow. References made to working with others were highlighted in light purple. Pink was used to highlight statements referring to student success through collaboration with others. Statements referring to student growth were highlighted in green. Gray was used to highlight responses on learning from other teachers, and bright pink was used to highlight statements referring to the specific needs of teachers. This allowed me to visualize similarities and differences in the data. Table 1 represents a sample of a priori and open codes that emerged in through data analysis. The complete table is located in Appendix C.

Table 1

*Codes Identified from Participants' One to One Interviews and Journal Entries During Open Coding*

Participant ID	A Priori Codes	Open Codes	Excerpt
T4	Perspectives	Concern for students' well-being	"I've got SPED kids. I've got Tier kids. I've got kids that are on grade level and kids that are above. I have got to figure out how to service all of those children at all of those different levels and make sure that they understand the content."
T1	Challenges	Not enough time to plan	"If you really want me to fully meet the needs of this inclusion classroom, I have to have the time to plan and meet the needs of my students."
T5	Successes	Students find success through collaboration	"I'm confident that when students are able to collaborate and have meaningful discussions with peers who are at different levels, they learn so much more and they are able to apply what they learned in a different setting."
T2	Improvements	Finding a balance for implementation	"I still have four kids that cannot do the standard at all, and I feel like I barely have time to pull them."
T3	Professional Development	Addressing teachers' specific needs	"Teachers don't know how to put it all together effectively. Between guided reading, conferencing, meet all their needs, and deal with behavior. Teachers are under extreme anxiety and stress. We have too many things to do, and we don't do any one thing well."

As each code was identified, I made notes in the margins and used bracketing techniques to remove any personal opinions or ideas. As I discovered similarities in the data, I created a table to visually organize the data. I color coded each response using a specific color of text to represent each participant. T1's responses were typed using dark pink. T2's responses were typed using red. T3's responses were typed using dark blue. T4's responses were typed using dark green, and T5's responses were typed using dark yellow. T6's responses were typed in bright green. T7's responses were typed in dark red.

T8's responses were typed in dark purple, and T9's responses were typed in navy blue.

The table was separated based on a priori codes and open codes. After my open coding analysis was finalized, I discovered thirty codes that emerged from the participants' responses.

I identified open codes that connected to the a priori codes perspectives, challenges, successes, improvements, and professional development (see Table 1). I implemented creative coding through the use of Braun and Clarke (2012) six phases of thematic analysis. This created hierarchical code structures based on relationships between identified codes. I then created top level codes and sublevel codes. This enabled me to form meaningful groups of data. I also noted any concepts directly related to the a priori codes that were created previously. I was able to narrow codes down and clearly identify similarities in the data. As I identified similarities, I made notes in the margins to record discoveries made through data analysis. I used various colors of highlighting and font colors to make additional notations in the margins. This allowed for the visualization of the new codes. I created tables to help organize codes for analysis (see Appendixes C and D).

Once open coding was completed, I utilized axial coding techniques to further dissect the data and identify connections between the codes (see Table 2). From the open coding results, I highlighted responses that represented sub codes in the data. These were reoccurring words, phrases, or concepts. This helped me explore the perspectives of teachers on differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. Thirteen sub codes were identified from the axial coding. Table 2 represents a sample of a priori codes, open

codes, and axial codes that were identified from data analysis. The complete table is in

Appendix D.

Table 2

*Codes Identified from Participants One to One Interviews and Journal Entries During Axial Coding*

Participant ID	A Priori Coding Categories	Open Coding Categories	Axial Coding Categories	Excerpt
T8	Challenges	Working with other supports	Lost instructional time	“It can be extremely difficult when students are being pulled from instruction for other services such as speech, occupational therapy, and physical therapy.” “Teachers need further professional development in terms of behavior management. When there are many students with diverse abilities, sometimes behavior management can be challenging.” “Most of the time I’m going in, and I feel like I am a glorified paraprofessional. Whereas, I know that it (co-teaching) can be done much more effectively.”
T6	Professional Development	Addressing teachers’ specific needs	Behavior management	
T5	Professional Development	Addressing teachers’ specific needs	Co-teaching models	

### Phase 3: Searching for Themes

I used thematic data analysis to enable essential themes to emerge and be identified. Thematic data analysis was used to examine text to organize large amounts of

data into categories. As I identified emerging themes, data was cross-referenced with demographic information to reveal any common trends among participants' responses. I used demographic information to make conclusions in relation to the research question and identified any discrepant cases. Member checks gave participants the opportunity to review a one-page summary of data analysis. None of the participants found any disputes with the information.

I focused on open and axial codes to identify patterns in the data. I identified there were three patterns that emerged from the data analysis a) concern for students, b) teacher confidence in abilities, and c) lack of effective resources. I conducted a deeper analysis of patterns, so I could identify themes. Three themes emerged: a) teachers' main concern was for students, b) teachers had a lack of confidence when implementing differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms, and c) teachers felt they did not have enough effective resources to enhance instruction.

#### **Phase 4: Reviewing Potential Themes**

Phase 4 was a detailed process of examining each theme to determine if it could be more than one theme. I used questions from Braun and Clarke (2012) to further identify viable themes:

- Is this a theme or a code?
- What is the quality of this theme? (is it useful to the dataset or research question)
- What are the boundaries of the theme? (what does it include or leave out)
- Are there enough data to support each theme?
- Are the data too diverse or wide-ranging?

By using these questions, I was able to identify codes that were too broad. This allowed me to narrow down specific codes and analyze relationships in the entire dataset.

### **Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes**

These themes emerged in the data review: (a) teachers' main concern was for students, (b) teachers had a lack of confidence when implementing differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms, and (c) teachers felt they did not have enough effective resources to enhance instruction. Following extensive data analysis, I was able to answer the research question: What are teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms? All participants placed the most emphasis on the importance of meeting the needs of each individual student both academically and emotionally. Participants also shared the joy that is experienced when students succeed. Participants identified that there is a struggle with teacher confidence in the areas of implementation of differentiated instruction and meeting the needs of students with disabilities. They also identified multiple barriers that hindered the effectiveness of their instructional practices.

### **Phase 6: Producing the Report**

I produced the report by organizing the data collected from interviews and reflective journals. I detailed and shared a summary of the results in Chapter 4. In the summary, I shared the participants' demographic information, setting, data collection procedures, and data analysis phases. Participants were never identified and confidentiality was never jeopardized. There were no discrepant cases identified through the data analysis process.



### **Specific Categories and Themes**

The responses from participants helped to provide information about their perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms. The categories (see Table 2) were created based on the similarities of codes. Participants had various amounts of years teaching and implementing differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms. This helped to provide variations to perspectives.

A common category experienced by all participants was differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms was challenging. Many participants felt it was challenging to meet the individuals needs of each student. They also shared that there was not enough time to efficiently plan or provide effective instruction. Participants felt that further professional development opportunities would increase teachers' confidence in providing differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms.

I gained a deeper understanding of the successes and challenges teachers face when implementing differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms. This IPA study revealed the participants' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms were very similar. A detailed description of emerging themes is in the results section of chapter.

### **Discrepant Cases**

Throughout the data analysis phase of my research, I found no evidence that was contradictory to the findings. Further analysis was determined to be unnecessary. If I had observed inconsistent data, I would have addressed all variances between the findings.

## **Results**

While analyzing participants' responses relating to a priori codes, I found many of the participants had similar responses once I completed open coding. Participants were open when sharing their lived experiences on differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. There were three themes that emerged in the data: (a) teachers' main concern was for students, (b) teachers' lack of confidence when implementing differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms, and (c) teachers did not have enough effective resources to enhance instruction. Following data analysis, I was able to answer the research question: What are teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms?

### **Theme 1: Teachers' Main Concern was for Students**

The first theme that emerged through data analysis was teachers' main concern was for their students. They were concerned about meeting both their academic and emotional needs in the classroom. The key to differentiated instruction is addressing the individual needs of each student in a classroom. This can be extremely difficult when students are performing at a wide range of ability levels. This is also compounded by meeting the emotional needs of learners and maintaining equity for all students.

Participants also reflected on the successes that students experienced in the classroom. They described how students who faced the greatest challenges appreciated every success. They also were inspired by the collaboration that takes place between students who provide support for one another. Participants shared their perspectives on differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms through interviews and journal entries.

T4, T5, T6, and T8 discussed more about how differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms was difficult for students.

This theme was continually repeated with all participants. This theme included four subthemes determined through axial coding: lack of students' self-confidence, inability to provide what all students individually need, teaching students to appreciate our differences, and the importance of building relationships with students. Participants expressed that their students' experiences in the classroom were the most important aspect to their teaching.

Participant T3 indicated there is more worrying about students' emotional needs than students' academic needs. This reinforced the theme of teachers' main concern for students. The participants' desire was for their students to want to come to school and be successful. Participants T1, T4, T5, and T8 agreed, they felt students who struggled would easily lose their motivation to learn and master standards.

Participants T3, T4, T5, and T8 agreed students become aware of their struggles, and their inability to keep up with others in the class. Students often become aware they are in the "low" group. This can be detrimental to students' self-confidence, thereby, causing concern for students' well-being.

Every participant gave information on the difficulty to meet the needs of every learner in the classroom. Each wanted to ensure every child makes progress and experiences success. They felt some students simply "fall through the cracks" and do not get the support they need. Participants T1, T2, T3, T4, T6, and T8 discussed their concern for students who would benefit from accelerations. Participant T1 shared, "It's my kids

who need to be accelerated that need a little bit more attention. My struggling students are so needy; my higher learners often get pushed to the side.” This statement reiterates the theme of teachers’ main concern was for students.

Participants T3, T7, and T8 indicated that they want their students to be accepting of each other regardless of differences. T7 noted that students with disabilities do not want to be in the spotlight. They want people to know that their disability does not define who they are. Every child wants to be accepted and appreciated for their unique gifts and talents. Participant T3 commented, “If we are a family, we are here for each other. I have never one time heard one person talk down to another person in this room.”

Participant T8 shared:

The first things that come to my mind are a safe place for all learners and an environment that allows them to be successful and to grow regardless of their abilities, strengths, or weaknesses. I think of a place where all learners are accepted and valued.

These statements support the theme of teachers’ main concern was for students by emphasizing that students want to be a part of a class that supports each other. This helps to create a safe learning environment.

Participants also stressed the importance of building relationships with students. Participants T3, T4, and T8 provided insight on the importance of connecting with students. T8 stated, “You have to build trust with your students in order for them to learn to believe in themselves.” Participant T4 commented, “I find the most important thing I

can do as a teacher is to build relationships with my students. That is the very root of leading to their success. Sometimes they only need someone to believe in them.”

These participants’ comments further provide evidence of the theme of teachers’ main concern was for students. The comments emphasized each participants desire to have positive relationships with their students.

Participants T1, T3, and T7 noted the importance of knowing what level each student is at from the very beginning. If teachers do not have an understanding of the abilities of their students, they are not able to create goals, identify areas of strengths and weaknesses, and understand how to effectively differentiate instruction. Teachers must be able to identify the needs of each individual student. Participant T1 stated, “There is a lot of data that goes into the beginning to identify all of the proper levels in order to effectively implement differentiated instruction.”

Participants also identified successes that were experienced while differentiating instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms as well. These successes become pivotal in creating a positive experience for both teachers and students. Some participants reported the successes make every challenge worth facing.

Participants T1, T4, and T5 expressed how collaboration between students helped to enhance learning for everyone. Participant T4 was encouraged by the success of collaborative activities between students with various ability levels. They appreciated each other’s input and feedback. These types of interactions help to ease teachers’ concern for their students.

All participants shared the response that the greatest success for students comes when they experience growth in learning. When students can experience growth in learning, they come closer to meeting their goals and mastering skills. This can only be accomplished through effective instructional strategies.

Participant T2 stated:

I believe the most successful differentiated class can show every child showing growth and meeting them at those readiness levels, so they can see and I can see their growth from where they came from not just where I'm feeding them from the same area and they are just stagnant. But me being able to see that growth at the end would be the most rewarding.

This statement helps to highlight the theme of teachers' main concern was for students by providing insight into what teachers determine to be their ultimate goal which is student success.

## **Theme 2: Teachers Lacked Confidence when Implementing Differentiated Instruction in Inclusion Classrooms**

The second theme that emerged following data analysis was teachers possessed a lack of confidence when implementing differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. Participants noted through interviews and journal entries their frustrations with the complexities of implementing differentiated instruction effectively in inclusion classrooms. Participants T1, T2, T3, T7, and T9 referred to differentiated instruction as being difficult, intimidating, and a lot of hard work. Many participants expressed with increased experience, they slowly increased their confidence levels. They also shared that

it was difficult to admit to colleagues and administrators this was an area they struggled with for fear of being judged as an ineffective teacher. They also shared the stress experienced with the amount of work that is needed to effectively plan for the diverse needs of learners.

Participants T1, T2, and T3 revealed they struggled with their confidence in implementing differentiated instruction. They shared it takes time to understand the expectations that administrators have for the implementation of differentiated instruction. Participants were concerned if they were implementing it effectively. Participants T2, T4, T5, and T9 shared they were not always comfortable meeting the needs of students with disabilities when they did not have any knowledge of how to best serve them. These insights help to further support the theme that teachers lacked confidence in implementing differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms.

Participant T1 shared, “I feel pretty overwhelmed. I am being asked to do so many random things that I feel like everything is out of control.” Many of them expressed being overwhelmed with so many responsibilities that go beyond typical classroom instruction, such as meeting the medical needs of students.

Participants T2, T7, and T8 expressed that teachers’ confidence in implementing differentiated instructional strategies in inclusion classrooms will improve with experience. The more time teachers spend practicing differentiated instruction and meeting the needs of diverse learners; the more opportunities they will have to experience successes and failures. Out of these lived experiences, teachers will develop confidence in their practices because they will know what instructional strategies are effective.

Participant T8 added, “I think perspectives vary greatly based on experience. Some teachers who have not had inclusion classrooms view them very differently than those who are experienced with them.”

Teachers understand that administrators will look for differentiation in their instructional practices. This can be stressful for teachers who do not have a firm grasp of what differentiation should consist of. Participants T1, T3, and T4 shared their concerns about the fear teachers often associate with differentiation instruction in terms of their professional evaluations. Participant T3 responded, “Teachers have a fear of being judged. If they know I’m struggling with differentiation the next time they (administrators) are in my room, they are going to be looking for that.” This statement further identified the theme that teachers’ lacked confidence in implementing differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms.

When participants were asked what was the first thing that came to mind when they hear the word differentiation. Many responses consisted of the phrase “a lot of hard work.” Participants T2, T3, and T8 pointed out the hard work that may accompany differentiated practices. Participant T3 shared, “A lot of work; differentiation is just a lot of work.”

Participants T1, T5, and T7 shared how data helps to drive the instructional practices of the teachers. This was true for both general education and special education teachers. Participant T1 noted, “I use data every day to drive the next day’s groupings.” Participant T5 stated, “While parallel teaching we were looking at standards and data and



creating groups.” Participant T7 responded, “Another success is that we have looked at data together and found ways to help students meet their potential.”

Many of the participants shared successful differentiated instructional practices they have implemented in their classroom. This highlighted how differentiation can positively impact student learning and how differentiation can be presented to students. The focus on student success was reiterated.

Participants shared teachers are continually reminded instructional practices must be rigorous for all learners. This can pose specific challenges in a classroom with a wide range of abilities. Participants T2, T4, and T8 shared insight on how they address rigor in their instruction. All students must experience challenges through their learning. If teachers do not understand how to implement rigorous differentiated instructional strategies, this will also adversely impact their confidence levels.

Participants T8 and T9 discussed how the effective implementation of differentiated instruction can result in higher test scores. This can positively impact the number of students reaching levels of proficient and distinguished on state testing, therefore, resulting in higher levels of school performance. This provides administrators and teachers the data necessary to make essential decisions about instructional practices, and it identifies students that are at risk or require acceleration.

Participants shared when there are issues with differentiated instruction there can be a negative impact on student performance. This adversely impacts teachers’ confidence when their students do not perform up to expectations. Teachers worry when their students perform poorly it is a direct reflection of their personal teaching abilities.

They realize this can negatively impact future evaluations. Participant T3 stated, “I fear when my students do not perform well my administrators will view me as a poor teacher. I don’t want to lose my job over test scores.”

**Theme 3: Teachers did not have Enough Effective Resources to Enhance Instruction.**

The third theme that emerged was teachers felt they did not have enough resources to enhance instruction. The most pivotal lacking resource was time. All participants felt there was not enough time to plan. They also discussed that there was not enough time to provide effective instruction. Participants shared many ideas for areas of improvement and strategies to become more effective at implementing differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms.

Participants knew they had some resources, but they did not know how to effectively implement them. Many of the resources are web based instruction, and teachers are comfortable using them for instruction. Participants T3 and T5 shared they loved all the computer programs they have access to, but they wished they knew how to use them.

This theme emerged with all nine participants. Many of them shared they typically take their work home to make sure they have planned effectively, and they often run out of time during instruction to implement everything they have prepared.

Participant T5 added:

“My job is to help every student grow, and I don’t feel like I can properly plan for all the kids. I will just have to move on without them - sometimes it seems like we

just throw thing after thing at the kids and hope they catch a few concepts. There just isn't enough time. It doesn't sit right with me but I also don't know how to completely fix the issue.”

This statement captures the general sentiment of all participants on their lack of effective resources to enhance instruction. They understand the needs of their students and the amount of work required to effectively meet those needs. It is challenging to maintain optimism when one feels there is not enough time to plan and execute instructional practices.

Participants T2, T3, T5, T7, and T8 expressed concerns about the lack of planning time when working alongside others, especially with co-teachers. They shared that it is difficult to have alignment with expectations when teachers do not have the opportunity to sit down and discuss how to best meet students' individual needs. A few of the participants expressed concerns about the lack of planning time with co-teachers.

Participant T7:

“There are many challenges a teacher faces when implementing differentiated instruction in an inclusion classroom. One is the lack of support from the general education teacher. Another challenge is the different levels of the learning disabilities.”

Several of the participants discussed how the lack of a shared planning time with co-teachers adversely impacts instruction. Participants T5, T6, and T9 expressed their frustration with their inability to work directly with their co-teachers to identify how to best meet the individual needs of their students. It is difficult to align expectations for

student growth when teachers do not plan together. Participant T6 stated, “Having shared planning is definitely challenging. It is difficult to collaborate with co-teachers.”

Participant T9 added, “Not having the same planning as the special education co-teacher, lack of resources, and lack of support from administration is extraordinarily frustrating.”

A few participants noted how instruction was impacted when students are pulled for services. T5 expressed how general education teachers sometimes resent students being pulled for progress monitoring and its negative impact on the co-teaching relationship. Participant T8 shared frustration with service providers such as speech and occupational therapists.

Participants T1, T2, T3, and T8 shared educators have more responsibilities than teaching students. They look after their physical needs as well. They must take into account that students’ performance in the classroom can also be impacted by other factors such as home life, health, and poverty. This can result in teachers becoming overwhelmed and not knowing how to meet the needs of the whole child. Participant T8 shared, “My biggest challenge is having enough of myself to go around and planning how to make the best use of my time.”

Participants commented many areas can be improved upon concerning a lack of resources for effective instruction. Participants expressed they need to be given supports to produce improved student performance. There were three key codes that emerged on the category of improvements.

All participants revealed that not scheduling enough planning and instructional time negatively impacts student learning. They reported there is not enough planning

time scheduled to effectively plan for the diverse needs of their students. They also believed that they do not have enough time in their segments to appropriately take students deeper into their learning before having to go on to the next subject or standard. Participant T2 shared, “I still have four kids that cannot do the standard at all, and I feel like I barely have time to pull them.”

Participants T1, T2, T3 and T4 expressed frustration with the programs the district is providing to meet the needs of students. Some feel there are too many; this makes it difficult to know where to start or determine which one is best to use. It has proven to be overwhelming for teachers to discern what is best practice and which programs are most effective.

Participants were asked if administrators should be concerned with differentiated instruction. All participants felt that administrators should be concerned with differentiation instruction, but they felt that administrators were out of touch with how overwhelmed teachers are when preparing differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. Participant T2 shared, “As an administrator, I think making sure paras and push-in teachers are placed in rooms in which they will be utilized by the teacher is crucially important.” Participant T7 shared:

I think that administrators should be concerned with teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. This way all students get the appropriate education. If teachers are not giving students what they need, they are not getting an appropriate education.

Participants also shared that flexibility is extremely important when teaching differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. They noted that the best plans may not always work on a given day. Sometimes plans must be revisited at a different time. Teachers must be willing to think creatively with their instruction and sometimes take risks. Participant T2 stated, “I don’t always feel I have the freedom to target the instruction that is needed, because I am building supports in someone else’s lesson plans. However, I have had to be very flexible in my planning because of this.”

Participants felt they did not have adequate training to meet the specific needs of students with disabilities. Participants noted that they felt intimidated by teaching students with disabilities because they did not have any training on how to support their specific academic or behavioral needs. Participant T2 shared, “I felt intimidated, especially depending on the students’ needs if I didn’t feel like I had enough training on how to meet their needs.”

T1, T2, T3, T4, T6, and T7 felt the most beneficial form of professional development was through observing other teachers. They determined that is was a “real life” opportunity to watch another teacher implement instructional strategies effectively with diverse learners. They felt that teachers grow the most professionally by watching others. Participant T3 stated, “Talk to your principal, who’s the best in the school at differentiation and then go and observe how they do it.”

Some teachers do require explicit professional development to address areas of weaknesses. Teachers need their professional development differentiated to meet their personal learning needs just like students. If a teacher is struggling with how to use a

specific resource or implement a specific instructional strategy, that teacher needs specialized professional development to address that concern.

Participants T2, T5, T6, and T8 stated that behavior management in an inclusive setting can be very challenging. This is especially true when there are many different types of disabilities represented in a single classroom. Each student has his or her individual behavioral needs. Teachers often had not been trained on how to support students effectively. Participant T8 noted, “I think it is also important to have a deep understanding of how to create an accepting and safe environment for all learners.” Participant T6 shared, “Teachers need further professional development in terms of behavior management. When there are many students with diverse abilities, sometimes behavior management can be challenging.” When teachers lack professional development that addresses areas of weaknesses, teachers will struggle to effectively meet the needs of every learner.

Special education teachers were concerned with the lack of knowledge general education teachers had of the various co-teaching models that can be implemented. Participant T2 commented, “I sometimes feel as if I am not welcomed to fully take part ownership of students.” Participant T5 stated, “Most of the time I’m going in, and I feel like I am a glorified paraprofessional. Whereas, I know that [co-teaching] can be done much more effectively.” Participant T6 shared, “More professional development about effective differentiated strategies and co-teaching models are greatly needed.” Teachers who work together in inclusion settings must be able to collaborate to meet the individual needs of learners.

Throughout the data analysis process, I continually noted how themes correlated to the RQ and sub-questions of my study (see Table 3). All themes fell under the single RQ of this study, but they varied when determining the relationship to sub-questions. Each theme directly correlated to a specific sub-question.

Table 3

*Themes' Correlation to RQ and Sub-Questions*

RQ: What are teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms?	
SQ1: What are the challenges and successes teachers encounter in planning and using differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms?	
SQ2: What do teachers believe will improve their use of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms?	
Themes	Correlating Sub-Question
Teachers' main concern was for students.	SQ1
Teachers had a lack of confidence when implementing differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms.	SQ1
Teachers felt they did not have enough effective resources to enhance instruction.	SQ2

### **Evidence of trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

I used a reflective journal to write down thoughts and theories that emerged during the data collection process to ensure credibility and provide reflexivity. I wanted to increase my level of self-awareness and maintain trustworthiness throughout the study. Interview notes were detailed, and audio recorded for quality assurance. Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed exactly verbatim. Participants received a one-page study summary after data was analyzed for member checking. Participants did not



have any concerns with the summary of findings. These measures helped to support credible results and conclusions of this study.

### **Transferability**

Transferability was accomplished from the results of a purposeful sampling of participants that were selected. Participants included teachers with a vast range of experience and educational backgrounds. Some participants possessed advanced degrees. All participants were qualified and teaching certificates were in good standing. I provided thick descriptions and comprehensive details of setting, participants, interactions, culture, resources, and policies, so other researchers and readers can make connections from this study's findings to their own personal experiences.

### **Dependability**

Dependability was achieved in this study by maintaining consistent procedures during the interview process and data collection. The interview questions were open-ended yet specific, reducing the risk of off-topic conversation. Questions were read the same and in the same order for all interviews. Bracketing techniques were implemented, so I was able to set aside personal views and assumptions. Member checks gave participants the opportunity to review a one-page summary of data analysis and provide additional information. Participants had no additional information to add. I concentrated on not allowing my perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion settings to create any preconceptions or skew data collected. Overall, the use of audit trails provided a step-by-step guide of the data collection process regarding this research and its interpretation.

**Confirmability**

I used both audit trails and a reflective journal to ensure confirmability. Audit trails allowed me to transparently describe the steps taken from the beginning of the study to the development and reporting of findings defining a research path. A rationale was given for each decision that was made throughout the research process. By implementing a reflective journal, interpretations were based on my personal preferences and views but were secured in the data.

**Summary**

Through this IPA, I explored teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms in a rural school located in the southeastern United States. In Chapter 4, I discussed a priori codes that were implemented at the beginning of the data analysis process and the codes that emerged. The data was collected from nine K-3 general education or special education teachers of inclusion classrooms who participated in one to one interviews and maintained a reflective journal for 7 days. Interview and journal responses helped to explore the lived experiences of participants.

At the beginning of each interview, I collected demographic data to provide additional information on the participants. Participants identified their number of years of experience, level of education, and grades/subjects previously taught. Each one to one interview included eight open ended questions that were derived from the research questions (see Appendix A). This allowed participants to be engaged in discussions about their perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. An audio

recording was made of each interview and transcribed by hand. The transcriptions were uploaded into MAXQDA for storage.

Participants then completed journal entries for 7 days which were guided by 7 questions (see Appendix B). I followed by transcribing all journal entries from each participant and followed by uploading transcripts into MAXQDA for storage. I also transcribed entries from my reflective journal and began desegregating the data by hand-coding the emerging codes line by line. Once I completed all coding, three themes emerged in the data: (a) teachers' main concern was for students, (b) teachers lacked confidence when implementing differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms, and (c) teachers did not have enough effective resources to enhance instruction. Following data analysis, I was able to answer the following research question: RQ: What are teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms?

Based on the first sub-question, "What are the challenges and successes teachers encounter in planning and using differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms?", the participants described in interviews and journal entries that it was a challenge to plan effective differentiated instruction due to limited time. Participants expressed their concern for feeling some students were left behind because their individual needs were not being met. They felt there was not enough time scheduled to allow for opportunities to take students deeper into the content. They were only given 50 minute blocks of instruction, oftentimes, time ran out before they could meet with all small groups.

Participants also discussed how difficult it was to work with other support personnel or new programs due to the lack of training on best practices. They addressed

the need for additional differentiated professional development to meet their specific needs. Teacher confidence was a concern due to a lack of training and understanding of how to implement best practices.

Participants recognized there were successes to celebrate when teaching students in inclusion classrooms. They admired how collaboration between students helped them to excel in the mastery of skills. Participants also shared how students who receive the appropriate instruction showed tremendous growth throughout the year even though it may not be on grade level.

The second sub-question, “What do teachers believe will improve their use of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms?”, was addressed in interviews and journal responses. Participants believed by addressing the challenges they face each day it improved their use of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. Through professional development opportunities, teachers may be given the tools needed to address the individual needs of their students. Also having more time to plan and provide instruction could effectively address the individual needs of all students

Participants felt there was a need for professional development on all the programs available to support differentiated instruction, especially for new teachers. They also felt teachers needed the opportunity to observe each other in the classroom implementing differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms, so they could see how it can be carried out effectively. The emergent themes recognized the lived experiences of teachers’ perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms.

Chapter 5 includes conclusions, recommendations, interpretations of the findings for each theme, and suggested topics for further study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusion, Recommendations

The purpose of this IPA was to explore teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms in a rural school district in the southeastern United States. IPA was used for an in-depth examination of teachers' perspectives and experiences through one to one interviews and reflective journals. IPA allowed me to examine the personal experiences of teachers while implementing differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms. This study was pertinent because there was little research on the combined topics of differentiated instruction and inclusion classrooms. I used the following RQ and two SQs to guide my study.

RQ: What are teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms?

SQ1. What are the challenges and successes teachers encounter in planning and using differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms?

SQ2: What do teachers believe will improve their use of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms?

In Chapter 5 I discuss the research findings and how they connect to Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory and Piaget's (1936) theory of cognitive development. The discussion includes how findings are related to the current literature. Implications, limitations, and recommendations are also included in this chapter.

Three themes emerged from the data: (a) teachers' main concern was for students, (b) teachers lacked confidence when implementing differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms, and (c) teachers did not have enough effective resources to enhance

instruction. These themes identified teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms, which was confirmed with current literature

### **Interpretation of Findings**

My interpretation of the findings of this IPA was based on nine one to one interviews, reflective journal responses, the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, and the conceptual framework of Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory and Piaget's (1936) theory of cognitive development. The helped to confirm and extend knowledge about teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms.

### **Themes**

#### **Theme 1: Teacher's Main Concerns were for Students**

Teachers had varying perspectives of their lived experiences pertaining to differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. Participants shared they are most concerned with the well-being of their students. They were worried how struggling learners compared themselves with high achieving students in the same classroom. Researchers addressed that differentiated instruction emphasized that higher level students would contribute more to the classroom than lower level students (Bannister, 2016; Cohen & Lotan, 2014).

Participants also shared they were concerned that high achieving students did not receive the rigorous instruction required to efficiently challenge them because teachers spend so much of their time addressing the needs of students who are behind. T3 stated, "I've got SPED kids. I've got Tier kids. I've got kids that are on grade level and kids that are above. I have got to figure out how to service all of those children at all of those

different levels and make sure that they understand the content.” Piaget’s (1936) theory of cognitive development was important to differentiated instruction (Galvan & Coronado, 2014). Piaget believed ideal learning happened when there was an association made between the student’s cognitive level and instruction (Besch, 2014; Carlson & Wiedl, 2013). When students did not make a connection between their cognitive level and instruction, it created anxiety for teachers who were determined to meet the individual needs of every student. This can be extremely difficult when students are performing at a wide range of ability levels. Teachers’ effectiveness in implementing differentiated instruction could be impacted by their understanding of differentiated instructional strategies (Coubergs et al., 2017; Suprayogi et al., 2017).

Participants expressed their main goal was to build positive relationships with their students and foster collaboration between students. T8 stated, “You have to build trust with your students in order for them to learn to believe in themselves.” They recognized the value of students supporting each other in the classroom. The research confirmed students who participated in inclusion classrooms were more likely to be accepting of others’ differences and respect people from diverse backgrounds (Westwood, 2018). T4 shared, “I find the most important thing I can do as a teacher is to build relationships with my students. That is the very root of leading to their success. Sometimes they only need someone to believe in them.” There was a gap in the literature describing the impact of positive relationships between students and teachers of inclusion classrooms and its correlation with planning differentiated instruction.



Participants further explained the importance of students collaborating in inclusion classrooms. T5 noted, “I’m confident that when students are able to collaborate and have meaningful discussions with peers who are at different levels, they learn so much more and they are able to apply what they learned in a different setting.” They admired how collaboration between students helped to excel in their mastery of skills. This connects to Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivist theory. Social constructivist theory is the idea children with special needs should be educated alongside their peers, such as found in inclusion settings (Spratt & Florian, 2015).

## **Theme 2: Teachers Lacked Confidence when Implementing Differentiated Instruction in Inclusion Classrooms.**

Some participants shared they often struggled with the implementation of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. T2 added, “I would say confidence was definitely lacking for a long time, and I don’t know if you ever get complete confidence in what you’re doing because there is always something else thrown at you, or you get new students thrown in throughout the year that you don’t know how to serve.” They all agreed on increased experience implementing differentiation instruction helped to create greater confidence. Researchers determined teachers with experience in inclusion classrooms had more affirmative perspectives (Coady et al., 2016; Paju et al., 2016).

Participants also shared the stress experienced with the amount of work that is needed to effectively plan for the diverse needs of learners. T1 noted, “I feel pretty overwhelmed. I am being asked to do so many random things that I feel like everything is out of control, and I’m concerned about how my students will do on testing.” Planning

for differentiated instruction is time consuming and especially difficult for novice teachers (De Neve, Devos, & Tuytens, 2015). Participants shared instruction had to be data driven. Many participants indicated it involved a tremendous amount of time as they assessed their students and developed individualized plans.

Participants also shared successes experienced through differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. When students experienced growth and achievement, it reassured participants they were meeting the needs of their students and implementing differentiated instruction effectively. This supported previous research on when students felt successful, their confidence rose, and they became more willing to explore more challenging concepts without the anxiety of the fear of failure (Morningstar et al., 2015; Shoulders & Scott Krei, 2016; Valiandes, 2015). This emphasized how differentiation can positively impact student learning. Students who attended classrooms where teachers effectively implemented differentiated instruction were more engaged and made more school progress than students in classrooms that did not employ differentiated instructional strategies (Little et al., 2014; Njagi, 2014; Suprayogi et al., 2017; Valiandes, 2015).

Student growth had a positive impact on school performance. Participants shared when students were experiencing growth this positively impacted the number of students reaching levels of proficiency and distinguished on state testing. When students were not meeting academic goals, however, this adversely impacted teachers' confidence concerning their own teaching performance. T3 shared, "I fear when my students do not perform well my administrators will view me as a poor teacher. I don't want to lose my

job over test scores.” The negative perspectives teachers possess are compounded by teachers often being evaluated by students’ test scores (Gaines & Barnes, 2017; Prilleltensky et al., 2016). Teachers’ performance and student achievement may be adversely impacted when teachers’ voices are not heard (Monsen, Ewing, & Kwoka, 2014; Paju et al., 2016). Teachers must feel comfortable sharing instructional concerns with administrators.

### **Theme 3: Teachers Did Not Have Enough Effective Resources to Enhance Instruction.**

Another concern for participants was a lack of effective resources. The literature identified teachers were concerned with the lack of time for effective instructional planning, collaboration with other teachers, and lack of resources (De Neve et al., 2015; Nicolae, 2014; Round et al., 2016; Sokal & Sharma, 2014). All participants expressed they did not have enough time to plan or implement differentiated instruction. T5 added, “My job is to help every student grow, and I don’t feel like I can properly plan for all the kids. I will just have to move on without them - sometimes it seems like we just throw thing after thing at the kids and hope they catch a few concepts. There just isn’t enough time. It doesn’t sit right with me, but I also don’t know how to completely fix the issue.”

Many participants also felt they had resources, but they did not have the knowledge of how to effectively implement those resources. T3 shared, “I love the fact that our district spends money on all of these computer programs, but I honestly don’t know how to effectively use them.” This reflected the lack of pre-service and in-service professional development opportunities on how to meet the needs of students with

disabilities in general education classrooms (Florian & Graham, 2014; Gaines & Barnes, 2017). Professional development helped to increase teacher knowledge and sustained effective daily teaching practices (Lakkala et al., 2016; Nishimura, 2014). Participants shared there was a need for further professional development especially for computer programs utilized by the school.

A few participants stated it was often difficult to work with the multiple support personnel who are involved with students in inclusion classrooms. T5 stated, “Most of the time I’m going in, and I feel like I am a glorified paraprofessional. Whereas, I know that it (co-teaching) can be done much more effectively.” The effectiveness of co-teachers could be negatively impacted if there is a weak relationship between teachers (Hamdan et al., 2016; Shoulders & Scott Krei, 2016). Participants noted scheduling often became an issue that was difficult to address with support personnel.

Participants also shared they did not always use administrators as a resource. They indicated teachers are fearful to confide in administrators they may have a weakness with differentiated instruction. They were afraid they would be unfairly judged and not have their voices heard. T8 responded, “I would say “please don’t let your leadership position make you forget the reality that happens in the four walls of a classroom.” Participant T3 shared, “A teacher is only one person and there are very few teachers, if any, I have met that are ok with not being able to meet the needs of all their students.” Researchers determined principals who gave regular positive feedback, had open communication, gave support and unity, used his/her power for the good of the school, and shared values for the benefit of the school had teachers with higher levels of

self-efficacy (DuFour & DuFour, 2016; Elisha-Primo, Sandler & Godfrad, 2015; Kass, 2013; Richardson, 2014).

Participants felt the most effective form of professional development for learning how to effectively implement differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms was to observe other teachers who are accomplishing this task. T2 responded, “So just providing time especially for those new teachers to see where is it done well in our building. Let’s put them in there, so they can see. I feel that supersedes any kind of training.” They felt professional development needed to address the specific needs of teachers much like differentiated instruction addresses the specific needs of students. Participants expressed teachers should feel comfortable discussing their concerns with administrators, so they can all work together to develop effective instructional strategies through professional development opportunities.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivist theory and Piaget’s (1936) theory of cognitive development were the conceptual framework for this study. Social constructivist theory is the idea children with special needs should be educated alongside their peers, such as found in inclusion settings (Spratt & Florian, 2015). Through the theory of cognitive development, Piaget reinforced the importance of differentiated instruction and making connections to learners’ background knowledge (Coady et al., 2016; Dixon et al., 2014). I used this study’s conceptual framework to explore teachers’ perspectives of inclusion classrooms and the use of differentiated instruction to socially construct new knowledge.

The conceptual framework focused on student learning which was vital for my study on teachers' perspectives. It gave a sound foundation to construct a clear understanding of how teachers' perspectives may impact student learning. It related to the IPA approach by providing perspectives into the experiences of teachers implementing differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. This study identified challenges and successes teachers encounter when planning differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. The conceptual framework supported the importance of discovering what teachers believe will help them become more successful at implementing differentiated instruction, and what influences current professional development opportunities to have on differentiated instructional practices.

The journals and one to one interviews were used to collect data for narratives on the lived experiences of participants. Audit trails were maintained to provide records on all steps taken throughout the research process. Audit trails allowed me to transparently describe the steps taken from the beginning of the study to the development and reporting of findings defining a research path (see Anney, 2014; see Creswell, 2009; see Korstjens, & Moser, 2018).

### **Limitations of Study**

When considering limitations, the outcomes of the study may be difficult to generalize from a small sample of the population (Tipton, Hallberg, Hedges, and Chan, 2017). There were nine participants who taught inclusion classes in K-3. This study examined the perspectives of teachers from one elementary school in a single district. The sample of participants were from a small rural school district; therefore, the sample

may not adequately reflect a larger population such as a large school district or urban area school district.

As a former general education and special education teacher, I had personal perspectives concerning differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. I addressed this limitation by setting aside my own biases and focused solely on the data collected from one to one interviews and journals. I kept a reflective journal to avoid inferring assumptions and biases for reflexivity. This ensured the voices of the participants and not my own were heard resulting in trustworthiness. Information was bracketed to ensure dependability of all themes that were identified, and safeguarded my interpretation remained unbiased. I focused on the immediate insight into the phenomenon being studied. This gave me with clear objectivity that was not clouded by previous theories or ideas.

There was also limited research on the combined topics of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. This made it difficult to make a determination of gaps in research on practice. The literature review mainly focused on the independent topics of differentiated instruction or inclusion classrooms. A measure addressed this limitation by allowing information to be synthesized and provided inferences into the combined topics.

### **Recommendations**

In this study I examined teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms in a rural school district in the southeastern United States. When my study was completed, I was able to identify other topics for future research opportunities. I recommend a follow-up study with a larger pool of participants including grades four

through eight. This will help to further identify teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms from varying grade levels and ages of students.

I recommend that an additional study focusing on how teachers' relationships with students can impact differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. The impact of teachers' positive relationships with students was not mentioned in the reviewed literature. This is an area that represents a gap in literature.

I recommend district administrators and school administrators use this study to create professional development opportunities to address teachers' concerns. This will help to address teachers' confidence on effective implementation of differentiated instructional strategies. Administrators can also work together to create a collaborative culture in their schools, and teachers will feel comfortable sharing their concerns with each other.

I also recommend that administrators develop additional opportunities for planning. This study revealed teachers need more time to plan and implement instruction. There must be a strong consideration from administrators to evaluate the current planning and instructional times. This may require a district policy change on planning and classroom segments for instruction.

Another recommendation is for administrators to examine scheduling and provide more opportunities for co-teachers to effectively plan with each other. This will allow the general education teacher who is the content expert and the co-teacher who is the special education expert to combine their knowledge to successfully meet the individual needs of students in their classroom. They can also develop lesson plans that will use both teachers



to lead instruction in the classroom. This will alleviate one co-teacher feeling superior to the other.

### **Implications**

This study may impact positive social change by giving teachers an opportunity to share their experiences in inclusion classrooms and implementing differentiated instruction. This may lead to administrators hearing the concerns and successes of teachers and lead to the development of appropriate professional development activities to address teachers' needs. The collaboration between teachers and administrators can result in the catalyst for social change. Researchers have noted educators felt when their leaders have heard their voices, an impact for positive social change could take place as communication was strengthened and professional learning communities were reinforced (DuFour & DuFour, 2012; Kass, 2013; Rentner et al., 2016).

### **Participants**

In this study, participants shared both challenges and successes of implementing differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms. One of the greatest challenges participants noted was not enough time to plan or implement instruction. This confirmed the results from other studies. Multiple studies revealed teachers felt there was not enough time for adequate planning or instructional practices (Barr, 2014; Pilten, 2016; Werts et al., 2014). Participants shared that when differentiation was implemented effectively, students did show academic growth in their learning. Implications for positive social change include teachers having a willingness to share their concerns with administrators and collaborate on solutions.

**Administrators**

Administrators could use the information from this study to develop professional learning opportunities that will help to build greater confidence in their teachers.

Implications for positive social change include improved understanding of teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms. District personnel and administrators who are willing to address teachers' needs and their desire to share their authentic knowledge related to lived classroom experiences provide teachers with a platform to voice concerns and relieve stress and anxiety (Garrick et al., 2017; Walton, Nel, Muller, & Lebeloane, 2014). Teachers need to feel comfortable expressing their concerns with administrators.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms in a rural school district. There is research that examines the individual topics of teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction or teachers' perspectives of inclusion classroom, but there is little research on the combined topics. I interviewed and collected reflective journals from nine participants, and I examined their perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms in a rural school district in the southeastern United States. The participants were transparent about their successes and concerns pertaining to differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms.

Three themes emerged from the data: (a) teachers' main concern was for students, (b) teachers lacked confidence when implementing differentiated instruction in inclusion

classrooms, and (c) teachers did not have enough effective resources. The results of this study fill the gap in research on practice by contributing to a better understanding of teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 classrooms.

Teachers work each day to meet the individual needs of students through differentiated instruction. This can be challenging in inclusion classrooms where there are a wide range of learning abilities. My study gave new knowledge on teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in K-3 inclusion classrooms. The data in this study may provide administrators with a clearer understanding of the successes and concerns teachers have pertaining to differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. This will provide administrators the data they need to develop effective professional development opportunities for their staff.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

### Interview Protocol:

1. All one to one interview questions and responses will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.
2. Next, participants will be given with journals to write down their reflections for 7 days. Participants will be given with guided questions to help with their reflections.
3. Transcriptions will be annotated for reoccurring themes and ideas.
4. The coding program MAXQDA will be implemented to store and organize data.
5. Themes that emerge throughout the data analysis will be identified and recorded.

### Interview Questions

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RQ: What are teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms?

- a. What are the challenges and successes teachers encounter in planning and using differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms?
  - b. What do teachers believe will improve their use of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms?
- 

1. **IQa:** When you hear the words differentiated instruction and inclusion classroom what are the first things that come to mind?
2. **IQa:** Describe some of the challenges you face while planning as a general/special education teacher of an inclusion classroom.
3. **IQa:** Describe some of the challenges you face when implementing differentiated instruction in your inclusion classroom.
4. **IQa:** Describe what successes you have had as an inclusion teacher when planning with your co-teacher.
5. **IQa:** Describe some moments that your differentiated strategies have been successful.

6. **IQb:** What ideas do you have that will improve your use of differentiated instruction in your inclusion classroom?
7. **IQb:** What types of professional development opportunities do you believe would benefit teachers in the areas of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms?
8. **IQb:** Why do you think that administrators should be concerned with teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms?

## Appendix B: Journal Guidelines

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The purpose of the journal is to give the researcher insight into the daily experiences of the participant's life in an inclusive setting and the implementation of differentiated instructional strategies. Please spend at least 15 minutes a day journaling about experiences in the classroom. Please comment on anything that you believe will help me develop a better understanding of your perspective of differentiated instruction in inclusion settings. The following list includes examples of areas that would be beneficial to comment on:

- What type of social interactions are taking place between all students?
- How are students learning from each other?
- How are all students learning needs being met?
- How are instructional practices tapping into student background knowledge?
- What challenges do you face when planning instruction?
- What are some of the successes that you've seen with your students when mastering skills?
- If you could share one aspect of your experiences with an administrator what would that be?



## Appendix C: Themes Identified from Participants' One to One Interviews and Journal

## Entries During Open Coding

Table 1

*Themes Identified from Participants' One to One Interviews and Journal Entries During Open Coding*

Participant ID	A Priori Codes	Open Codes	Excerpt
T4	Perspectives	Concern for students' well-being	"I've got SPED kids. I've got Tier kids. I've got kids that are on grade level and kids that are above. I have got to figure out how to service all of those children at all of those different levels and make sure that they understand the content."
T2	Perspectives	Teacher confidence	"I believe it starts with the person and then with the professional. And so if they are feeling uneasy with it or not confident, it's never going to be the best that you can be. I feel like that topic is so difficult to master. Even into my Master's and Specialist, I would learn more about differentiation and it would feel so overwhelmed to talk about,"
T7	Perspectives	Importance of recognizing where students are in the beginning	"Differentiation is meeting students where they are to better help them be successful. Teachers must find where students are academically from the beginning, and build from that."
T3	Perspectives	Differentiation is a lot of work	"A lot of work; differentiation is just a lot of work."
T1	Challenges	Not enough time to plan	"If you really want me to fully meet the needs of this inclusion classroom, I have to have the time to plan and meet the needs of my students."
T2	Challenges	Working with other supports	"You're like ok, now I'm going to have someone else push into my room. I want this to flow, and I want to be able to benefit all of these needs. How can we make this work?"
T3	Challenges	Needs beyond instructional planning	"I have a student with diabetes that I have to help monitor glucose levels. Like I have to make sure this person doesn't touch tree nuts and this person has issues. There are so many needs besides instruction that has to be addressed. I just can't modify enough and I don't have the time."

T5	Successes	Students find success through collaboration	“I’m confident that when students are able to collaborate and have meaningful discussions with peers who are at different levels, they learn so much more and they are able to apply what they learned in a different setting.”
T1	Successes	Student growth	“I have SPED students, EIP students and a very few others on grade level, and I’m proud to say that my students are showing tremendous growth on benchmark assessments.”
T7	Successes	Data driven instruction	“Another success is that we have looked at data together and found ways to help students meet their potential.”
T8	Successes	Instructional Practices	“When thinking of successes with differentiation, reading groups immediately come to mind. My students are at such varied levels, and yet they are all so eager to be successful. By differentiating the materials to be at a level appropriate for their current performance, they have all been able to apply the grade-level skills using text that was accessible to their levels.”
T9	Successes	Impact on school performance	“Because their (admins) jobs depend on successful test scores. Allowing teachers to have a voice can provide feedback of successes and failures with differentiated instruction. Teachers will feel more confident in their abilities to differentiate their instruction and test scores will rise.”
T2	Improvements	Finding a balance for implementation	“I still have four kids that cannot do the standard at all, and I feel like I barely have time to pull them.”
T7	Improvements	Administrators accountability	“I think that administrators should be concerned with teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in inclusion classrooms. This way all students get the appropriate education. If teachers are not giving students what they need, they are not getting an appropriate education.”
T3	Improvements	Flexibility	“Expect it to change. You want to see it change. It’s going to be one of those years where it’s going to be changing all the time and be flexible. Be ready for those challenges and there will be sometimes where what you try won’t work, and you just see and you have to say, ‘We’ll put this over here and will

T1	Professional Development	Learning from others	try something else.”” “I learned more from that from watching other teachers, especially when they are teaching the same lesson that I was going to teach than I do sitting in a training session. I like to see it done with the kids in the room at the same time.”
T3	Professional Development	Addressing teachers’ specific needs	“Teachers don’t know how to put it all together effectively. Between guided reading, conferencing, meet all their needs, and deal with behavior. Teachers are under extreme anxiety and stress. We have too many things to do, and we don’t do any one thing well.”

## Appendix D: Themes Identified from Participants' One to One Interviews and Journal

## Entries During Axial Coding

Table 2

*Themes Identified from Participants' One to One Interviews and Journal Entries During Axial Coding*

Participant ID	A Priori	Open Codes	Axial Codes	Excerpt
T4	Perspectives	Concern for students' well being	Students' lack of self confidence	"So building vocabulary, activating prior knowledge and providing graphic organizers was very helpful in assisting students with applying the skills in organizing their thoughts in order to help their lack of confidence."
T3	Perspectives	Concern for students' well being	Not meeting the needs of each individual student	"I've got SPED kids. I've got Tier kids. I've got kids that are on grade level and kids that are above. I have got to figure out how to service all of those children at all of those different levels and make sure that they understand the content."
T8	Perspectives	Concern for students' well being	Teaching students to appreciate our differences	"The first things that come to my mind are a safe place for all learners and an environment that allows them to be successful and to grow regardless of their abilities, strengths, or weaknesses. I think of a place where all learners are

T3	Perspectives	Concern for students' well being	Building relationships	accepted and valued." "One thing I think should be said is that teachers aren't most effective if they are run ragged from trying to meet needs 100% of the time... Teachers who are invested and love the students and enjoy coming to school every day, to form relationships... Those are the most effective."
T2	Perspectives	Teacher confidence	Experience equals confidence	"Coming up with ways to hold them accountable while you may not be able to stand there the whole time came with experience. I could have never done that in my first few years. This helped increase my confidence."
T3	Perspectives	Teacher confidence	Fear of being judged by administrators	"Teachers have a fear of being judged. If they know I'm struggling with differentiation the next time they (administrators) are in my room, they are going to be looking for that."
T8	Challenges	Working with other supports	Lost instructional time	"It can be extremely difficult when students are being pulled from instruction for other services such as speech, occupational therapy, and physical therapy."
T6	Challenges	Working with other supports	Lack of shared planning	"Having shared planning is definitely

T4	Successes	Instructional Planning	Providing rigorous instruction	challenging. It is difficult to collaborate with co-teachers.” “As a ELA teacher I try to find literature that is needed to address the structure and text structure that are being taught at a level that challenging readers can understand, and not realize that they are at a lower level than their peers.”
T1	Improvements	Finding a balance for implementation	Scheduling	“I need more (time). Time to adequately plan, time to pull all my groups, time for fun. I also need some support. Because some of my students are classified EIP, they don’t have a co-teacher like SPED students. So, I’m basically trying to fill all kinds of gaps while accelerating the other kids. With no support. My students just need more of me that I can give out. It is factoring it in when scheduling, and I know that schedule can never really be fixed. I know that my math block is technically supposed to be 50 minutes, but it seems like a dooms day attempt every day when I try to do it in 50 minutes.”
T4	Improvements	Finding a balance for implementation	Programs	“Differentiating is a must! I believe most teachers are successful in the

				learning environment element of differentiating, but the greater challenges are in the content delivery, the process - choosing the engaging activities that help students master the content, and lastly the product making we have too great of a variety of assessments to assess student learning.”
T6	Professional Development	Addressing teachers’ specific needs	Behavior management	“Teachers need further professional development in terms of behavior management. When there are many students with diverse abilities, sometimes behavior management can be challenging.”
T5	Professional Development	Addressing teachers’ specific needs	Co-teaching models	“Most of the time I’m going in, and I feel like I am a glorified paraprofessional. Whereas, I know that it (co-teaching) can be done much more effectively.”